

Inspection of Merton local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 28 February to 4 March 2022

Lead inspector: Brenda McLaughlin, Her Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding

Children in the London Borough of Merton benefit from good and outstanding services. Highly aspirational and committed senior managers and political leaders place children and their families at the centre of their decision-making. Leaders have strengthened and built on the impressive work of the previous inspection in 2017. There is evidence of continuous thoughtful and creative innovative work that has enhanced the quality of social work practice across all teams. A critical aspect of mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been that of effective proactive action, working together with key partners to keep children safe and to support all staff in their work with children and families.

Strong and respectful safeguarding partnerships act to protect children from harm. Excellent services are delivered by skilled, experienced social workers and other frontline practitioners to provide sensitive and innovative child-centred interventions. These are making a positive difference to enrich the daily lived experiences of children, while making them safer.

Children in care and young people leaving care, including those with complex needs, are provided with exceptional care and support. Decisive action is taken to protect them from harm when required. Dedicated, experienced staff and carers are highly

ambitious for children and work very well together to ensure that children remain safe and achieve in life.

What needs to improve?

- The quality of work with some children by out-of-hours staff when children need to come into care.
- A flexible needs-led housing offer when young people leave care.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: good

1. Children and their families benefit from responsive well-coordinated universal and targeted early help services, helping to reduce harm. A recently updated coherent multi-agency strategy underpins the delivery of these services. This supports a system-wide relationship-based professional practice approach that is aligned to the social work model. Skilled and specifically trained early help practitioners use a variety of tools to build relationships with children and help them to express their wishes and concerns.
2. Good-quality assessments are overseen by experienced early help managers and a 'team around the family' approach ensures that most children and their families can quickly access the appropriate level of help. This is making a real difference to their day-to-day lives, as it prevents risks escalating. Actions by managers to improve performance monitoring, as well as audit programmes, are positive developments across early help teams. Professionals welcome the support given to improve the mental health and well-being of children, such as the provision of free counselling for children and young people in schools.
3. When children's needs increase, or concerns for their safety and well-being escalate, timely and decisive action is taken to secure access to statutory services. Effective systems to triage referrals ensure that thresholds between early help and Merton's integrated children and families hub are well understood. The co-location with children's social workers of many other professionals, for example the contextual safeguarding specialist, the early help coordinators and police and health colleagues, enables highly effective collaboration and timely information-sharing, leading to appropriate and timely interventions. School leaders reported to inspectors that they feel exceptionally well supported by the local authority children's hub when seeking strategies to safeguard their learners.
4. A daily multi-agency morning meeting held in the hub shares information speedily about children at risk of harm. Management directions are clearly recorded; risks and strengths are appropriately identified, carefully analysed and consistently informed by relevant previous history. Work transfers quickly to the assessment and intervention teams, depending on the level of risk and need. Consent to share information is well established. Rigorous management oversight of this work ensures that children's experiences are central to timely decisions about the steps needed to help and protect them from harm.

5. Child protection strategy meetings include key agencies involved with the child and are used constructively to share information. Such meetings are well recorded and management decisions are clear about next steps required.
6. Assessments using Merton's strengths-based social work model identify the impact of parental mental illness, domestic abuse, substance misuse and the neglect of children. Thoughtful and sensitive work with children during the assessment is supporting them to cope with and navigate entrenched parental difficulties. Trauma-informed therapeutic practice that assists professional thinking and approaches through systemic reflection and evaluation is augmented effectively by good-quality management direction and specialist consultants. Exceptional examples were seen of social workers sensitively using bespoke direct work tools to evaluate the impact of parental vulnerabilities, while keeping a clear focus on children's need to remain safe. Social workers act to routinely involve fathers in assessments and plans. Care is taken to understand parental and family histories, cultural heritage and each child's unique and diverse needs.
7. Although now reducing, a substantial increase in the numbers of children on child protection plans during the pandemic created additional pressures on staff, but this has been managed well. Action by senior leaders to increase capacity ensures that children are seen at home and in school. Most children's plans are reviewed regularly and reflect children's updated needs and changes in their circumstances. However, for a very small number of children, progress has been too slow and they have remained at home too long. Some enter care in an emergency, often out of hours, and are not taken to foster carers by social care staff.
8. Visits to children are purposeful and workers take the time to get to know children well. Sophisticated bespoke direct work tools, developed by practitioners, are helping children with complex needs, including vulnerable adolescents, to manage their behaviours and express their views. Exemplary examples of effective direct work with children are reducing risk. Children's voices are listened to, acted upon and used to inform plans and planning. However, an increase in staff turnover means that a small number of families experience too many changes of social workers, leading to some inconsistency and delay in progressing work.
9. Child protection conferences are mostly timely. Multi-agency core groups are held regularly and are used effectively to review and update child protection plans. They explore risks through regular information-sharing, clear write-ups on progress to plans and setting further objectives to help keep children safe. However, the quality of child in need and child protection plans is not consistently good. A minority of these plans lack clarity about risks, desired outcomes or timescales.
10. Edge-of-care services have recently been reconfigured and strengthened. They include effective family group conferences that help children remain safely with their parents or to access help and support from family and other professionals. The team has evolved as part of an organisational restructure to include

purposeful crisis intervention family network meetings. Both of these approaches are empowering families and helping to safely divert children from care. Letters before proceedings to parents set out what needs to change in plain language, helping them to realise the gravity of the situation and what is required to prevent their children entering care. Leaders recognise that more work is needed to strengthen senior management oversight of this work.

11. Work with vulnerable adolescents and those at risk of exploitation is helping to keep them safer. Emerging risks to young people are identified early using screening tools. Effective multi-agency arrangements ensure that there is swift identification of children at risk. Evidence of individualised skilful direct work is helping children understand risks posed to them, helping them develop strategies to exit harmful situations. Established professional partnerships and good management support strengthen the response to risk across communities and are helping practitioners engage young people in danger of extra-familial sexual and criminal exploitation. While contextual risks remain very real for young people, there is evidence of professionals persistently making an impact with their work.
12. Disabled children receive good support from their social workers. Social workers work inclusively with children, all family members and carers to identify the right level of support and service to meet complex health and disability needs.
13. The number of children electively home educated in Merton has increased. Active oversight of the quality and suitability of children's home education provision, as well as the impact this is having on their educational progress, rapidly identifies children into suitable education provision. Leaders have used information about this cohort of children to further develop highly specialised education provision.
14. Partnership working between professionals in multidisciplinary teams is successful in supporting children who are missing from education.
15. Management oversight of frontline practice is strong and this supports robust practice in most teams. Leaders are working to ensure that the quality and frequency of supervision are consistent across all services.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: outstanding

16. Children in care and young people leaving care in Merton receive outstanding care and support. Teams of highly committed, ambitious and determined professionals work extremely well together to help children to remain safe and achieve in life. The local authority is dedicated to pursuing timely permanence for all children if they cannot live safely with their birth families.
17. Children in care are supported by workers who know them well. Significant effort is made to engage with all children, including those with additional needs. Case recording is clear and up to date, and the voice of the child is consistently evidenced. Highly skilled, well-trained practitioners use a wide range of tools in

their direct work with children. They understand their histories and identities. They visit them regularly, understand their needs and build relationships of trust.

18. Professionals work quickly to assess risk and plan next steps when children become looked after in unplanned or emergency situations. Adroit planning ensures timely support for newly arrived unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Professionals are mindful of the impact of trauma and act quickly to support children's emotional well-being.
19. Access to tailored mental health support from the co-located child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) and by skilled social workers, alongside effective support for carers, is building children's resilience and preventing placement breakdown. Specialist placements are carefully selected for disabled children that can support their emotional, educational and therapeutic needs. Planning for transitions begins early and appropriately involves adult services.
20. Effective work by the independent reviewing officers brings additional independent rigour. They complete visits and monitor progress between reviews so that children's plans progress without delay. Care plans and reviews are sensitively written and reflect children's views and those of their parents and carers. These records help children understand their histories and why they are looked after. Children's participation and inclusion are prioritised and access to advocacy or mentoring are real strengths in Merton.
21. A vibrant Young Inspectors team and an active Children in Care Council ensure that children's views influence decisions by elected members and senior officers. Corporate parenting is a priority across the council. When young people do not feel happy about services, they are actively supported to access advocacy services to challenge decision-making.
22. Children in care who go missing are consistently offered independent return home interviews. These interviews inform strategy meetings and a regular 'missing panel', helping professionals plan interventions to reduce risk. Multi-agency safety plans help to safeguard children in care who are at risk of exploitation.
23. The work of the virtual school team is excellent. Strong strategic leadership and management oversight by the virtual school headteacher mean that outcomes for children looked after are consistently good. Innovative approaches that enable children to reach their full potential start from a very young age, and continue throughout their school time and beyond. Virtual schoolteachers know children well, tracking their progress and swiftly intervening when necessary. As a result, outcomes for most children improve when they enter care. Attendance at school or college for children in care is high. Support for children placed outside the local authority area is as strong as it is for those within the borough. Staff work very closely with designated teachers and school leaders. Pupil premium funding supports individual tuition where children are not making expected progress. Personal education plans are highly effective, and targets are precise and helpful for children.

24. Permanence planning and stability for children in care are effective. Parallel planning for those children unable to live safely with their parents is progressed speedily. Foster carers, adopters and practitioners work together to ensure that children will understand their journeys through care. Life-story work is a high priority for all children, with practice strengthened through recent training.
25. Permanent foster placements are carefully selected, ratified and celebrated. This helps children to feel secure in their long-term homes. The local authority is working proactively with external organisations to continue to improve the sufficiency of foster homes available, particularly for adolescents.
26. Most children in care and care leavers live in safe, stable, good-quality homes that meet their needs. Where it is appropriate, they live with their brothers and sisters, extended family or carers, who provide them with emotional warmth and stability. Good use is made of family group conferences and special guardians, enabling all children to live with family members where it is assessed as suitable and safe for them to do so.
27. Family finding through regional adoption agency arrangements supports timely placements for children. Child permanence reports have a real depth of information, including genograms and health information. Prospective adopter reports are comprehensive, helping ensure the right match for children. Adopters reported that they are positive about the adoption process. They feel well supported pre- and post-adoption and know how to access support.
28. The decision to increase the number of personal advisers (PAs) is a positive development. Enthusiastic, dedicated staff stay in touch with most care leavers and support them to live in safe and suitable accommodation.
29. Care leavers, including those with complex disabilities and mental health issues, receive very good targeted support to meet their accommodation, health and care requirements. Transition planning to adult services is highly effective, supported by collaborative partnership working. Leaders are increasing personal adviser provision for disabled care leavers. Managers and PAs work tenaciously and diligently to advocate on behalf of care leavers to ensure that they receive the best support to move safely towards independence.
30. Pathway plans are comprehensive, address young people's needs and are reviewed regularly, in line with statutory requirements. Placement decisions are person-centred. 'Staying put' arrangements are used particularly well for care leavers. The local offer for care leavers has been updated since the previous inspection. It is explained well in a format that is co-produced with care leavers.
31. Most care leavers remain in education, employment or training. Leaders provide strong support for university progression. They are strengthening support for alternative pathways, with work experience placements for unaccompanied asylum seekers who cannot access paid work, and more care leavers entering apprenticeships.
32. Committed PAs are persistent in their efforts to engage and support care leavers to achieve their goals. They maintain close contact through regular visits, including when young people are in custody or out of area. When it is in

young people's interests, their PAs remain involved beyond 25 years to ensure a positive transition to independent living. They encourage young people to be healthy and attend regular health checks. These are recorded in health histories for young people to ensure that they have a record when they leave care. This is an improvement since the previous inspection.

33. Staff use 'Passport to my life' booklets to support young people's housing applications and ensure that they are ready for the responsibility of their own tenancies. However, one issue raised with inspectors by care leavers is the requirement that they accept their first housing offer or risk losing their priority status. This is being addressed corporately.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: outstanding

34. Leaders have strengthened and built on the impressive work at the time of the previous inspection. As a result, children and their families continue to benefit from highly aspirational, committed senior managers and political leaders who place them firmly at the centre of their decision-making and who have a collective determination to provide high-quality services. This unrelenting focus has ensured that progress has been sustained and services continually improved, despite the unprecedented challenges of COVID-19. Leaders listen to their staff and 'think family'. For example, when staff said that they found the practice model too restrictive, they successfully adapted and expanded it to include more systemic, relationship-based approaches, successfully engaging parents and young people.
35. A critical aspect of mitigating the impact of the pandemic has been that of effective, proactive action, working together with key partners to keep children safe. Partnership working is strong, both at strategic and operational levels. These mature, well-established professional relationships enable committed leaders to set high expectations and standards of themselves and each other. Strong governance arrangements led by the chief executive are firmly in place, augmented by a culture of professional accountability, respectful challenge and mutual support across the partnership. Consequently, almost every child in Merton has access to good or outstanding support.
36. The director of children's services, who was previously the assistant director for early help and education, brings a wealth of experience and continuity to the role. She has taken a measured and sensitive approach to continuous development since her promotion to the role in April 2021 and models a reflective, collaborative listening style which conveys confidence. Consequently, respectful work with safeguarding partners serves to protect children from harm. For example, designated safeguarding leads (DSL) and school leaders welcome the exceptionally strong support they receive from children's social care. DSLs feel particularly well supported by having access to supervision and advice about vulnerable children.
37. There is consistent and commendable evidence, since the previous inspection and during the pandemic, of continuous thoughtful and innovative work by

leaders. For instance, co-locating a CAMHS multidisciplinary team to work across all children's teams provides highly effective trauma-informed interventions and consultation for staff and parents across all services, from early help through to care leavers and including foster carers. This excellent support is increasing staff and family's emotional resilience, informing practical therapeutic parenting skills in supporting, protecting and caring for vulnerable children.

38. Merton's involvement in teaching partnerships with local universities is increasing the recruitment of newly qualified social workers. A relentless focus on the recruitment and retention of frontline managers and social workers is increasing the number of permanent staff. Caseloads are manageable, providing staff with the space and opportunity to get to know their children and families very well. As a result, children benefit from a wide range of creative direct work which enables them to understand their circumstances and improves their safety.
39. Leaders have an accurate and balanced understanding of what is needed to continually improve services. Performance management is well established. Quality assurance activity has driven up standards across the service. A strengthened comprehensive audit programme is being embedded. Senior managers respond quickly to meet changing needs and demands for services. For instance, a nimble corporate response increased much-needed additional social work resources during the recent lockdown.
40. Carefully targeted support in the reconfigured children's services and the integrated family and well-being service helps families with a wide range of needs, including very complex difficulties. Services are provided by numerous agencies, demonstrating well-planned, cohesive and seamless partnership arrangements. Corporate parenting arrangements are well established across the council. Priorities are informed by the voice of children through the work of the young inspectors and 'Our Voice', the Children in Care Council.
41. Staff are appropriately proud of working in Merton. Highly qualified social workers and other frontline staff feel valued. They have good access to a wide range of training and development opportunities, with considerable investment in their professional development, leading to sophisticated and transformative direct work with children and their families.

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