

Inspection of Southwark local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 26 to 30 September 2022

Lead inspector: Tracey Ledger, His Majesty's Inspector

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

Children in the London Borough of Southwark who need help, protection and care continue to receive good services. Frontline staff, leaders and managers work effectively to safeguard and support children and to improve services provided to them. As a result, children's lives are improved.

Children and their families benefit from strong political and corporate commitment across all areas of the council. Political leaders and the recently appointed chief executive bring significant expertise and determination to provide the best possible support for children and their families. They have a tangible and positive impact on the services and are impressive champions for children. They know their children well and they make a difference.

Children are at the heart of practice in Southwark. Social workers think about what is important for individual children and act without delay. In a challenging context, leaders have enabled significant investment to ensure that frontline staff have low enough caseloads. As a result, they have time to work intensively with families when needed, and to reflect and consider ways to improve children's lives. Social workers also have access to therapeutic practitioners and specialists, and they receive good-quality supervision. This adds significant value to the service children receive.

What needs to improve?

- Safeguarding for children who are living in private fostering arrangements.
- Foster carer recruitment.
- The timeliness of life-story work for children.

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

1. Early help provision in Southwark is strong. Leaders maintain a focus on delivering effective early help services. Children and their families benefit from impactful preventative work. Children's needs are identified through good-quality assessments, leading to effective plans which are linked to presenting issues and deliver the help they need promptly. This improves their lives.
2. The multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) provides a timely and proportionate service for children and their families. Management oversight is a strength and is effective. Managers are a strong and supportive presence, readily available for social workers to discuss concerns. Effective management decisions in response to presenting risks lead to appropriate next steps.
3. Partner agencies co-located in the MASH ensure that relevant information is shared swiftly. Parental consent is overridden appropriately when required, enabling social workers to act at a pace consistent with the level of risk.
4. Children who need help and protection are seen quickly. Social workers develop strong assessments that demonstrate a good understanding of children's needs, strengths and risks. Direct work starts immediately and underpins and informs the assessment process. Social workers make good use of the in-house clinical consultants to understand the complexities of the issues children face. Support services are identified and put in place while assessments are ongoing. Practitioners work creatively to engage parents, particularly fathers. This means that parents engage quickly, and children's outcomes are improved.
5. Visits to children are regular and meaningful. Thoughtful, pre-planned, effective direct work helps practitioners to understand and explore children's experiences. Records of visits are well written and personalised, presented as letters to the child. These capture workers' observations as well as children's words. As a result, children's views, wishes and feelings are at the heart of social work practice.
6. Strategy meetings are held appropriately in response to escalating or emerging risk, and most are well attended. Any disagreements about initiating child protection enquiries are acknowledged and addressed, strengthening decisions by allowing for professional challenge. Initial safety planning is implemented effectively while ongoing checks are made.

7. When child protection investigations are required, they are robust and focus on presenting risks as well as wider issues, including risks to other children in the community. Good partner attendance and engagement in meetings supports effective decision-making. Collaborative work reduces risks for children. Managers have close oversight and grip of this part of the service. Effective audit and quality assurance work has helped improve the focus, quality and quantity of investigations. As a result, practice is stronger and fewer children and their families experience these statutory processes, for example when there are disputes between older teenagers and their carers.
8. Children are supported with the right level of intervention. Children's plans are clear, concise and easy to understand. Plans focus on the key priority outcomes, making them achievable and realistic. However, there is variability in the usefulness of contingency planning, so that in an emergency it is not always clear what the practical plans are for children. Children's plans are regularly reviewed, with good multi-agency contributions helping to gauge progress against identified outcomes.
9. Skilful chairs of child protection conferences maintain regular oversight of children's progress. They consult practitioners and families before each conference and at midpoint reviews, taking an active role in ensuring that children make progress.
10. Pre-proceedings work is effective. When children's circumstances do not improve, appropriate consultation underpins decisions to escalate interventions using legal frameworks. Families are given clear information about concerns and what is expected of them. Children's progress is closely monitored by managers, who prevent delay and ensure that care proceedings are initiated promptly when children's needs are not being met. The local judiciary and Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service told inspectors that they see strong assessments and plans in respect of children, and well-managed court work that ensures that children achieve permanency without undue delay.
11. Vulnerable adolescents are well supported by workers who are alert to the risks that children face in the community. Social workers have access to thorough and detailed consultations with the specialist missing and extra-familial harm team. The intelligence and resource information provided help workers put plans in place that are effective in reducing risks for adolescents. The specialist team co-works with social workers for children at the highest risk, and skilfully identifies cohorts of young people, to focus disruption work with police and other partners. As a result, agencies are aware of key and emerging risks for children, and they respond accordingly.
12. Not all children who are reported as missing have a return home interview. Leaders have recently brought responsibility for these interviews in-house, seeking to improve performance.

13. Children with complex needs and disabilities benefit from continuity of support through an all-age disability service. They are supported by workers who know them well, as they transition to adult services and support. Social workers broker effective multi-agency support, working closely with health visitors, speech and language therapists, schools, the child and adolescent mental health services team and adult mental health agencies to tailor support for children and their families with higher levels of need. Detailed plans are underpinned by comprehensive packages of support that reflect children's needs.
14. Children are visited regularly by their social workers. Workers use a variety of toys and activities to help them understand the experiences of children with communication difficulties. Specialist advice from the positive behaviour service supports workers' engagement with children, using a range of communication styles. This ensures that these vulnerable children can share their wishes and feelings and that social workers have a better grasp of their lived experience.
15. An effective local authority designated officer service ensures that concerns in respect of adults working with children are followed up comprehensively. Work in this area is tracked and monitored effectively.
16. Intervention and oversight of provision for children who are the subject of private fostering arrangements are not sufficiently robust. Children are not visited at a frequency consistent with the legal framework. Leaders are not ensuring that statutory processes, such as Disclosure and Barring Service checks, are completed quickly enough. This means the authority cannot assure itself that the safeguarding and welfare needs of these vulnerable children are being met. Leaders took immediate action to address this shortfall.
17. Good systems are in place to identify and offer support to children who are electively home educated. As far as possible, meetings are held to discuss the quality of education that children receive.
18. The local authority maintains good oversight of the children who are missing education. Practitioners work proactively and in partnership with schools, helping to ensure early identification of pupils who may miss education. Leaders have identified actions needed to improve support and address increasingly evident concerns for some children's emotional health.

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

19. Skilled, caring and dedicated social workers and carers provide good support for children in care or on the edge of care. A specialist therapeutic edge-of-care service delivers high-quality intensive bespoke packages that support children and young people to live successfully at home, or to return home

from a period of being in care. This small, highly skilled team is delivering limited interventions, but it packs a punch. Tailored interventions are helping children and their families learn new strategies and ways of communicating, enabling children to remain at home.

20. When children can no longer live at home, they are helped to stay within their extended families and local communities when it is safe for them to do so. When this is not possible, timely action is taken to safeguard children, including when there are significant exploitation or gang-related concerns.
21. Permanency planning is understood well and for most children long-term plans are secured quickly. Some children, including young children, sometimes experience multiple moves before their long-term home is secured for them. This is primarily because of limited placement choice available to meet children's complex needs. Children's care plans are strong, reflecting their needs accurately. Their reviews are timely and focus effectively on risk and need. Plans are updated to reflect new and emerging information.
22. Once children are in their permanent homes, dedicated and committed carers give children stability and enable them to make better progress across all areas of their lives. Foster carers receive good-quality training and development opportunities that help them meet the needs of the children they care for.
23. A high proportion of children looked after in Southwark are teenagers. Mostly, placements for them are suitable and good transition plans are in place to support them into adulthood. For a very small number, placements do not meet their needs and, despite some efforts by the local authority to change this, they have remained in unsuitable placements for too long and their progress has been hampered.
24. Children in care have a strong voice and influence within the local authority. Children told inspectors how important this is for them. They spoke passionately about the importance of being part of 'Speaker Box', the council's Children in Care Council. They treasure the friendships they have made and the opportunity it gives them to be a collective voice in service development. They feel valued and listened to.
25. Better manager oversight in panel meetings has improved the tracking of children in care and their care planning since Ofsted's last focused visit. However, there has not been enough focus on life-story work. For some children, this vital work is not started or is not completed in a timely way. This means that not all children have a narrative of their lives to help them make sense of their current situation.
26. Social workers keep children's diverse cultural and identity needs at the centre of their practice, and they understand what is important for them. They undertake good-quality direct work and spend time with children. However,

children's records are not consistent in quality or up to date. Leaders have acted to improve this area of practice. As a result, some stronger examples of recording are now permeating practice. For example, letters to children in the recording of visits are often exemplary accounts capturing children's voices and their lived experience. This detail will help children make good sense of their childhoods should they access their records later in life.

27. Some children experience too many changes of social worker. Children's accounts to inspectors emphasised the significant impact that frequent changes of social workers have had on their lives.
28. The virtual school and partners work well together to ensure that children in care receive the educational support they need to succeed. Individual children are making strong academic progress. Older children are being helped and supported into higher education, training and employment opportunities, as appropriate to their needs. Children's personal education plans capture their experiences, as well as evaluating their educational progress and personal development. However, not enough has been done to help a small group of young people who are persistently absent to access education on a regular basis.
29. Southwark's adoption practice continues to be strong. The partnership with the regional adoption agency (Adopt London South) is working well to support the needs of children who require adoption. Adopters are generally positive about their experiences. Achieving timely matching and introductions is a particular strength, ensuring that children move to their forever families as swiftly as possible.
30. Care leavers in Southwark receive a strong and effective service. They benefit from a level of support that meets their needs and helps them make tangible progress. Social workers and personal advisers are really interested in their care leavers and, through determined efforts, they keep in touch with virtually all of them. Young people continue to receive good support over 21, either through retaining their allocated workers or through the independence hub. The hub is available to all care leavers and offers additional targeted support to those who need extra help at times of difficulty.
31. Many care leavers in Southwark are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people. Workers understand the importance of religion, culture and identity, as well as the impact of trauma. They are careful to respond to individual needs in the plans and support they provide. They ensure that children and young people are safeguarded and quickly get the support they need. Care leavers who spoke to inspectors expressed their gratitude to Southwark Council, their social workers and their personal advisers. They all talked about how well they had been supported across every aspect of their lives. Most importantly, they are guided through the legal processes of applying for leave to remain. They told inspectors that Southwark is a 'special council' and like family to them.

32. Pathway plans are well written and wherever possible they are co-produced with young people. Plans are comprehensive and have a good focus on the needs of care leavers. Culture, religion and identity are given appropriate attention and care leavers benefit from their individual needs being respected and met. Most plans are reviewed when care leavers' circumstances change, for example when there is a change in their accommodation.
33. Care leavers receive a good offer from the local authority. This includes effective support for their emotional health from clinical practitioners based in frontline teams, who offer direct work to care leavers as well as consultation to workers.
34. Experienced practitioners enhance the support offer to care leavers in several other key areas. For example, the practitioner with responsibility for education, employment and training provides workers with up-to-date information. The local authority is aware of the need to further enhance to care leavers the offer of apprenticeships with the council's services or with local providers.
35. Most care leavers live in good-quality accommodation that is consistent with the level of support they need, although this is not always in their preferred localities. When care leavers are placed in other local authority areas, they do not always receive the full offer available to them as care leavers. For example, council tax exemption is applicable if care leavers live in Southwark, but this does not apply to them if they live in local authorities with different arrangements. This means that some care leavers are disadvantaged.

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

36. Leaders in Southwark know their services well. They continuously evaluate children's experiences and progress, and act when things need to change. Children and their families benefit from strong political and corporate commitment across all areas of the council. Political leaders and the chief executive all bring significant knowledge and experience and are focused on delivering effective services. Leaders know the strengths and weaknesses well and act to ensure that the service evolves and improves.
37. Corporate parenting is strong in Southwark. The inclusion of children and young people at corporate parenting panel meetings brings additional rigour and challenge. Children's voices and experiences are at the centre of this practice. Meetings focus on priority areas that matter for children and young people, such as access to appropriate accommodation. They help enhance the provision offered to them.
38. Leaders use a range of systems, panels and meetings to ensure that they have a good understanding of the risks for the most vulnerable children living in Southwark. A good range of quality assurance tools helps leaders

understand children's experiences. They use this information to direct activity effectively and respond to any areas that require improvement.

39. Since the last inspection, in 2017, leaders have invested in, and strengthened, several areas of practice that benefit children and their families. For example, stronger preventative early help services help families meet their children's needs, in many cases preventing the need for statutory intervention. Safeguarding older children at risk of extra-familial harm is also an area that has been considerably strengthened, so that children receive specialist interventions that help to reduce and manage risks for them.
40. Ensuring sufficiency of placements and foster placements is a persistent challenge for leaders. Leaders have acted, and plan to open a five-bedroom children's home. However, recruitment of foster carers lacks impetus and energy. While leaders recognise that recruitment activity is pivotal to maintaining sufficiency and choice, opportunities to transform, modernise and improve the approach to recruiting carers are not being delivered at the necessary pace.
41. Leaders carefully and sensitively support their staff and the wider community. Staff receive empathy and care, and leaders do all they can to ensure that their emotional well-being is a priority. Staff speak highly of managers and leaders across every area of the service. Operational managers are committed and visible. Staff appreciate their availability and the support they provide. Regular supervision helps social workers reflect and focus on children. Staff particularly benefit from the protected time they are given for group supervision sessions. These sessions include advice from clinical practitioners and are highly effective. Discussions and reflections are, for most children, used well to review their progress and provide direction to improve their lives.
42. Leaders have invested significantly in the workforce. They ensure that working conditions are good for their staff. Caseloads are low and manageable. Specialist teams and practitioners are on hand to provide advice, support and consultation. Staff appreciate this and can see the value this adds to their work and the positive impact for children and their families. Leaders have enhanced their offer to attract social workers. They take continuous steps to recruit, retain and develop staff. For example, there is a successful programme for newly qualified social workers, and more recently the local authority has been supporting several staff to undertake their social work training. Despite workforce challenges, Southwark is in a strong position because of worker stability and the longevity of its workforce. Many staff stay with Southwark for many years.
43. Staff enjoy working in Southwark. Their morale is high, and they appreciate the high level of support, the career progression opportunities, the learning and development offer and the ambition that the organisation has for them.

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