

Inspection of Lambeth local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 24 October to 4 November 2022

Lead inspector: Russel Breyer, His Majesty's Inspector

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

Services for children in Lambeth require improvement to be good, as was the case at the last inspection in May 2018.

Initial work to protect children at risk of harm is prompt, but long delays in making court applications mean that some children with longer-term plans are not made safe quickly enough. Too few children who go missing receive effective follow-up to understand and address the risk to them.

Too few children who need to be looked after and who are placed within their wider family, or with their parents where there is a legal order in place, receive timely assessment of their needs, or the right support to ensure that their placements continue to meet their needs. Children in long-term foster placements fare better, and make good progress. Care leavers are supported to achieve well. Services for children who need adoption have improved since the last inspection, when they were inadequate.

Lambeth has experienced a number of recent changes in leadership. Despite this, senior managers have provided stability. They have credible plans in place to address weaknesses and to further develop services, with significant investment secured by committed political leaders. The changes that have been made are beginning to show signs of impact, although most are very recent and services for many children are not yet good enough.

Lambeth faces considerable challenges in the recruitment and retention of staff. Nonetheless, leaders have ensured that workers' caseloads are manageable, although some children experience too many changes of worker.

Staff value the support they receive from their managers and leaders. They work with passion and enthusiasm to improve children's lives.

What needs to improve?

- Timeliness, oversight and effectiveness of pre-proceedings, care proceedings and plans for permanence for children.
- Identification, assessment and support to connected carers, and oversight and support of children placed with parents.
- Take-up of return home interviews and the impact of these in safety planning for children who go missing.
- Planning of transitions for disabled children.
- Impact of audit and independent review for children looked after and those with a child protection plan.
- Continuity of social worker and independent reviewing officer for children.
- Life-story work for all children with a longer-term plan.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: requires improvement to be good

1. Children and their families benefit from effective early help support and intervention. This is making a significant and positive difference to children's lives. Arrangements for step up and down are timely and ensure that there is continuity of support for families.
2. Most children referred to the integrated hub receive a timely and sound response. Overall, partners understand thresholds, although some health referrals are vague about the concerns and support required. When initial concerns are high, most strategy meetings take place quickly and children's safety is prioritised. Consent is appropriately understood and applied. Workers strive to contact wider family and the professional network to gather information. However, information is not always gathered from non-resident parents or from older children themselves. Management oversight is embedded and there is mostly clear and appropriate decision-making.
3. The emergency duty service for children is well resourced. Staff respond swiftly and appropriately to referrals and use problem-solving approaches. There is a lack of emergency placements available to children who need them. This too often results in children remaining in unsuitable arrangements overnight, such as in a police station.

4. Arrangements to respond to allegations against professionals are secure.
5. A relatively high number of children are taken into police protection in Lambeth. For most, this is appropriate, but for a small number of children situations could be managed so that police protection is not required.
6. Most children's assessments are comprehensive. Risks and needs are identified and understood. When concerns for children increase, strategy meetings are held to ensure that there is appropriate sharing of information and risk assessment by the professional network. However, for some children there is a delay in this meeting being held. This impedes understanding of risk, and means that next steps are not progressed quickly enough.
7. Multi-agency child protection conferences identify and explore the risks for children, and what needs to change to improve their lives, in an effective manner. Not all parents feel well supported to participate in virtual child protection conferences and more work is required. Most plans made at conferences address the risks appropriately.
8. Most core group meetings bring together family members and a wide range of relevant professionals to review and develop plans targeted to need. However, the quality and impact of some children's child in need and child protection plans are not sufficient to bring about sustainable change for them.
9. Too many children in pre-proceedings are subject to delay and some have continued to suffer harm. Leaders have recognised this and have taken steps to strengthen the oversight and quality of work for children in pre-proceedings. A small number of children have benefited from this, but the improvement is still in the early stages.
10. When concerns for children escalate further, some children experience more delay before concerns are put before the court. This undermines the strength of evidence and delays plans for permanence for children. Delays contribute to a low number of court proceedings ending in care orders, and some children are subject to repeat care proceedings. Leaders are addressing this through the development of the court progression team.
11. Some children subject to supervision orders are subject to repeat care proceedings, where the local authority has been unsuccessful in making the case for a care order and removal. For some of these children, this escalation is planned but for others an urgent application is made. Some children experience further delay in proceedings being issued.
12. When it is no longer possible for children to live safely with their birth parents, social workers seek to make alternative arrangements with family and friends. Delays in assessments mean that many of these placements do not meet fostering regulations, although for most children the arrangements meet their

short-term needs, and for some their circumstances clearly improve. Senior managers maintain oversight of most of these placements, although agreed interventions to increase support to children and their carers are not always evident on children's records. A small number of family and friends carers are not identified as such and do not benefit from support from a supervising social worker.

13. Practitioners are skilled at engaging with children. Creative and insightful direct work with children gives social workers a good understanding of children's experiences, wishes and feelings, and supports positive change. Most visits engage families and address the presenting problems well; however, visits do not always take place within the time frames required by the plan for the child and, for some children, this hinders progression.
14. The Flourish team provides compassionate, comprehensive support to mothers who have previously had children removed from their care. This improves outcomes for them and their children.
15. Disabled children who need support via a short-breaks provision have their packages reviewed by an experienced worker who knows their families well.
16. Most children with complex health and developmental needs are well supported and their needs are met. However, not all benefit from updated assessments and regular reviews. The quality of their plans is variable. Social workers use observation to get a sense of the child, but direct work with children to capture their views is less evident. For some disabled children, strategy discussions are not quorate and lack health attendance.
17. Children who are at risk of harm outside of the family do not all receive timely assessment and action that reduces the risks they face. Leaders have recognised this and have taken steps to strengthen community and partnership working. This work is in the early stages. There is a good awareness of child exploitation and information-sharing is strong, but the impact of interventions and support for vulnerable children and young people are inconsistent.
18. Return home interviews for some children who go missing lack the depth needed to gain a good understanding of the episode of going missing and to develop effective next steps to increase their safety.
19. Most 16- to 17-year-olds who present as homeless benefit from a child-centred and timely approach to assessing their needs and providing appropriate support and accommodation where needed.
20. Most assessments for children identified as living in privately fostered arrangements are timely and contain the necessary information. Visits capture children's views and wishes well. A low number of children are identified as living in private fostering arrangements. Leaders have identified a need to

increase awareness of when care for a child may require assessment as a private fostering arrangement.

21. The response to families with no recourse to public funds is effective.
22. Risks to children who are experiencing, or at risk of, radicalisation are understood and are reduced by multi-agency plans and intervention.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: requires improvement to be good

23. The decision-making for children to come into care is appropriate, although for some children it is not timely.
24. Most children in care live in stable, well-matched homes and, whenever possible, they live with their brothers and sisters. They make good progress in their health and learning, and their cultural and identity needs are well understood and promoted. Children enjoy a wide range of activities and hobbies, and spend time with family members. Many are supported by advocates and independent visitors.
25. Identifying emergency and planned care arrangements can take too long for a small number of older children with more complex needs. Plans to increase emergency and short-term care provision for children are progressing, but this is not currently having an impact for children.
26. Most children's needs and care arrangements are reviewed regularly. Reviews focus on the support children need to help them make progress. Children are encouraged to participate in their reviews. Some reviews do not take place at the required frequency, and some children have not had the benefit of consistent independent reviewing officers, which means children are less able to influence their plan.
27. The needs of disabled children in care are well understood. Planning for some of these children has been affected by changes in social workers and independent reviewing officers. Some transition planning does not start early enough and lacks required information, such as education information. Some children and families are not aware of the support available to them once they reach adulthood, or as care leavers.
28. A very small number of children with high and complex needs live in unregistered children's homes when appropriately registered homes cannot be found. Deprivation of liberty orders are in place for these children and are reviewed by the court. Children's needs are mostly understood, and quality assurance activity is in place to mitigate risks. Managers make continued efforts to find appropriate accommodation and require all unregistered providers to be in the process of registering with Ofsted.

29. Social workers visit children in care regularly, including those out of area. They take time to get to know them well. They are persistent in helping children develop trusting relationships and helping them to make progress. Social workers capture children's wishes and feelings well through direct work, and children's wishes are acted upon whenever possible.
30. Many children are matched to their long-term carers, and a small but increasing number leave care to live with adoptive families or with family members under special guardianship arrangements. Children placed for adoption are settled and thriving, and they live with their brothers and sisters wherever possible. For some children, plans for permanence are not considered early enough. A small number of children experience more than one set of proceedings before their future care arrangements are decided, which means that they experience delay in achieving permanence. Senior leaders have regular oversight of these children.
31. Some children leave care in an unplanned way. Specialist intervention and support are not provided for all these children quickly enough to reduce the risk of further family breakdown and a return to care.
32. Older children on full care orders who are placed at home with their parents are visited regularly. Their arrangements are reviewed and actions are taken to help safeguard them and ensure that they are well cared for within their families. However, suitability assessments and senior management agreement for many of these arrangements are not timely.
33. Children who are adopted are helped to understand their histories through thoughtful and creative life-story work. Later-life letters are sensitively written to children and are of good quality. There is more to do to ensure that all children benefit from this practice, but good progress has been made in this area.
34. The virtual school is effective. Children's personal education plans are reviewed and updated regularly to help them make progress. The pupil premium is used well to help source the extra help that children need, and this provides targeted and specialist support for them.
35. Children in care and care leavers are well supported to remain in education, employment or training. Care leavers are encouraged and supported to gain new skills which are helpful in adulthood, and to be ambitious.
36. Leaders have made progress in recruiting more foster carers. Most assessments of prospective foster carers are comprehensive and include appropriate checks and references, helping to ensure that foster carers are suitable for the task. Assessment of some connected carers needs to be improved and delays reduced.

37. Foster carers feel well supported by experienced and committed supervising social workers. They have access to a range of support, including psychological services. Foster carers and connected carers access a range of post-approval training that is relevant to the care of the children they look after.
38. Most care leavers are settled and make good progress. They are supported to access a range of accommodation, including independent tenancies, when the time is right for them. Floating support is provided to those who need it, to help them settle into independent living. 'Staying put' is actively promoted and is also available to those who pursue university education.
39. The needs and experiences of most care leavers are well understood and their pathway plans are regularly reviewed, but not always in the timescale they need, and not all plans are updated to reflect changing needs and circumstances. Most pathway plans describe the ambitions and personal plans of the young people. Plans are easy for young people to read, and have appropriate actions.
40. The refreshed local offer is not shared widely enough. Not all children and care leavers know about or access the full range of their rights and entitlements. Care leavers have asked for improvements in the timeliness of financial payments and access to savings held by foster carers. The local authority has plans in place to address these issues. These plans have not been shared with care leavers.
41. Care leavers do not feel that they are kept informed of changes in senior leaders, and they do not know who to go to should they need to raise a concern at the highest level. Care leavers say that the service they receive needs to be strengthened.
42. The 'Visions of Success' group, which represents children in care and care leavers, is not sufficiently well publicised, so not all children and care leavers know about it. Those who do attend feel consulted, but they do not know what has happened as a result. They do not consider that their corporate parents ask them about what is important to them.
43. Most care leavers living locally benefit from helpful community resources and specialist services. Personal advisers provide the same support to those living elsewhere, but without the benefit of local resources. When young people are missing, personal advisers hold them in mind and they make ongoing attempts to locate them and to advocate on their behalf.
44. Planning for care leavers leaving custody is too variable. Some have rushed, unplanned and unsupported moves which leave them vulnerable. Others have benefited from their pathway plans being reviewed while they are in custody;

accommodation is retained for them and they are well supported on release from prison.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: requires improvement to be good

45. Past changes of leadership have had an impact on the pace of change in Lambeth. The current leadership team has provided stability and has made steady progress in implementing development plans. Momentum is increasing. Senior political and corporate leaders demonstrate an in-depth knowledge of the functioning of children's services, and the needs and challenges facing children and young people in Lambeth. They have clear priorities, for example to tackle housing challenges for children and families and develop more opportunities for care leavers. Political leaders have committed significant investment to the improvement of current services and to fund new services to meet local needs.
46. Political and corporate leaders hold regular accountability meetings with children's services leaders, providing challenge and support. Accountability arrangements at a senior level link across partnerships through the Local Safeguarding Children Partnership Board, ensuring cross-system challenge and support. This is helping to address challenges across the system, but some persistent problems remain, with, for example, continuing delays in some health reports.
47. Leaders work effectively with partners to prioritise the needs of young people in the borough, for example with school leaders to prevent exclusion and with employers to develop internships for care leavers. The children's services sufficiency strategy links strongly to the area's joint strategic needs assessment.
48. Leaders are developing a learning culture to drive continuous improvement. They have developed a clear practice model which most staff understand well. Most staff feel well supported in their learning and development.
49. An audit programme is widely moderated and provides insight into practice, although some moderation reflects on the quality of the audit, not the quality of practice. Audits are not consistently supporting practitioner learning and having an impact on progress for children.
50. The self-evaluation of children's services describes how services are being developed to meet identified challenges, but is less evaluative on how well current services are addressing need. Many of the service developments described are in their early stages and have yet to show impact.
51. Leaders demonstrate their commitment as corporate parents by their focus on improving services for children in their care. For example, they devote resources to secure aspirational employment opportunities for care leavers,

supporting them to succeed. They also support child-centred care planning, for example by keeping placements open for young people who are in custody.

52. Leaders have a good understanding of local communities, are sighted on specific areas of need and use this information to develop services. They hear young people's voices through young people attending the corporate parenting board and at events arranged by the participation team. There is more to do to strengthen the connection between leaders and young people, and in celebrating their achievements.
53. Commissioners have taken steps to commission a wide range of support and new accommodation programmes. These are not currently in place to have an impact for children.
54. Managers have regular oversight of children's needs and the progress they are making. Supervision is used well to think about what is happening for the child, to reflect on what is working well and what needs to happen next. However, the impact of supervision in progressing children's plans is variable.
55. Leaders have recognised that permanency and tracking are areas to be strengthened, and they have made good progress. The foundations to support practice are in place but there is more to do. There is a backlog of planning meetings for some children, and delays in uploading records of meetings. This means that some children experience avoidable delay.
56. Some record-keeping for children is incomplete. This can mean that, as adults, children will not be able to understand all of the decisions made for them. This also affects the accuracy of performance information available to leaders.
57. Managers hold regular meetings to review performance and to provide challenge and support. These arrangements work across different levels of the organisation.
58. Some child in care reviews have not taken place due to staffing challenges. This has reduced the impact of the review system for some children. A system of case alerts enables independent reviewing officers to address drift and delay, although this has less impact in pre-proceedings and children's cases awaiting issuing of proceedings. The follow-up of recommended actions is not always timely. The involvement of independent reviewing officers is reflected in children's records, but their impact on progressing children's plans is less evident.
59. Leaders acknowledge that the use of unregistered children's homes is not in the best interests of children. These services are only used in exceptional circumstances when there is no registered provision available. Robust oversight of these children is maintained, with leaders regularly reviewing the quality of their care and their care plans. Extensive searches for registered provision have

not yielded placement matches for these children. The approach of only working with providers who are willing to register with Ofsted shows commitment to providing stability and good-quality care for children that is underpinned by regulations and care standards.

60. Leaders make concerted efforts to address recruitment and retention challenges. Despite the challenges, workloads are manageable. Workers value their supervision, both formal and informal, and have access to regular training and group supervision.
61. A small number of newly qualified social workers in their assessed and supported first year in employment were seen with work outside of their level of experience. This is not appropriate for their development and creates vulnerabilities for children and for the workers concerned. Managers have responded by allocating more experienced workers.
62. The council's workforce development offer mostly reflects the needs of the workforce. Development is not routinely discussed in supervision for most workers, so it is not clear how attendance at core training is monitored. Agency staff can access all aspects of training and development. This is critical in a workforce that has a higher-than-average proportion of long-term agency workers.
63. Workers value the support they receive from their managers and leaders. They demonstrate a genuine passion and enthusiasm for improving the lives of children in Lambeth.

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