

Inspection of Wandsworth local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 7 to 18 November 2022

Lead inspector: Amanda Maxwell, 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

The ambitious, dynamic and experienced senior leadership team ensures that children living in the London Borough of Wandsworth receive good support from its services. The vast majority of children receive the right support at the right time. Senior managers in Wandsworth are highly committed to improving the lives of children. There is strong corporate support, with appropriate investment to prioritise services for vulnerable children.

Since the inspection in 2018, when services were judged as 'requires improvement' overall, good progress has been made and most children and families benefit from the support and intervention that they receive. However, the tracking and monitoring of some discrete areas of practice, including children subject to child protection arrangements for long periods of time, are not sufficiently embedded. Therefore, further developments are required in management oversight to ensure that children's situations improve in a more timely way.

The healthy culture that has been created in the organisation places children at the centre of its ethos and approach. This is alongside the whole organisation embracing a 'support and challenge' model. These developments ensure that everyone is accountable for children's progress, and their impact is evident at all levels within the service.

The senior leadership team has further developed the application of the chosen practice model. An increasing number of children and their families are now additionally supported by specialist workers, such as psychologists, working alongside skilled social workers. This has helped parents to gain insight and understanding about entrenched behaviours that have a negative impact on their ability to care for their children. Through this individualised and intensive work, children's experiences have improved, and many families have been able to address these behaviours and bring about positive change; this has improved their parenting and the quality of their relationships with their children. Specialist workers also provide support for children in care, care leavers and foster carers.

What needs to improve?

- The intervention, quality, effectiveness and management oversight for homeless 16- and 17-year-olds and for the management of allegations against adults who work with children.
- The quality, effectiveness and timeliness of management decision-making for children who are subject to delays in child protection planning.
- Tracking and monitoring of children subject to the pre-proceedings phase of the Public Law Outline, to ensure that children come into care, or return home at the right time.

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

1. The majority of children in Wandsworth receive the right help at the right time. Children and their families are supported by a committed and caring multi-disciplinary children's service, with staff who work together creatively to improve outcomes for those who need help and protection.
2. Children and families have access to a wide variety of early help services. Work is impactful, leading to improved outcomes for most children. However, a small number of families do not engage with early help services after stepping down from statutory intervention, and workers do not routinely consider the risks, in order to ascertain whether these families should be stepped back up to statutory services.
3. Contacts into the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) are responded to appropriately and promptly. Parental consent is routinely considered and dispensed with when in the child's best interests. Screening and information-sharing from partners are thorough, with clear actions identified. Referrals are progressed in a timely manner. Staff in the MASH benefit from advice and guidance from specialist workers, such as domestic abuse specialists, substance misuse workers and housing specialists. The out-of-hours team provides an effective and timely response to children and their families.
4. When risks to children escalate, their needs are considered in timely multi-agency strategy meetings. The attendance of key partner agencies has

improved since the last inspection, although senior managers are working with police and health partners to ensure more consistent engagement. Detailed information-sharing and appropriate decision-making inform child protection enquiries, leading to a clear multi-agency protection plan being put in place for children.

5. The history, culture and diverse needs of children and their families are, overall, considered well and are integral to the ongoing assessment of risk. Social workers know children well and visits to them and their families are purposeful, demonstrating a balance of exploring concerns with adults and direct work with children.
6. The extensive use of specialist practitioners, such as domestic abuse workers and family therapists, working alongside social workers is a strength. Children benefit from wraparound intensive support and direct work that reduces risk and improves outcomes for them and for their families. Plans are detailed and focused, and children's experiences are captured well.
7. In most cases, the intervention and support provided for children and families who are subject to child protection planning are effective and timely. For a small number of children who have been subject to lengthy child protection planning arrangements, intervention has not been sufficiently robust, and consideration of the pre-proceedings phase of the Public Law Outline has not always been timely. However, more recent practice is addressing issues to improve their circumstances.
8. Emerging risks are now considered effectively within current planning, ensuring that children step up from child-in-need to child protection or pre-proceedings arrangements if necessary. Pre-proceedings work is increasingly effective and this is recognised by Cafcass and the judiciary. Letters before proceedings provide a detailed explanation to parents about what is expected of them. As a result, a substantial proportion of families are appropriately diverted from family court proceedings. Although there are monitoring and tracking processes in place, the effectiveness of these systems is inconsistent, and a small number of children experience delay when at the pre-proceedings stage.
9. The support offered to children and families from the Evolve team is a strength; the team undertakes significant bespoke work to reduce the risks of exploitation and gang involvement that are presented to young people up to the age of 25. Practitioners in the Evolve team support the safeguarding model by working alongside social workers. Impactful direct work is undertaken to help children to understand risk. Evolve workers demonstrate determination in building relationships with children. Multi-agency information-sharing is effective. The contextual safeguarding child protection conference format has been effective in reducing risk; plans are co-constructed with young people and focus on actions to help them to keep safe. Children are routinely offered effective, meaningful and thorough return home conversations which provide social workers with insight about reasons for episodes of going missing from care.

10. Children and their families who experience domestic abuse receive services that are highly effective and tailored to meet their needs. Multiple support services and interventions, including one-to-one work and group work, help families to understand and change negative behaviours. Effective safety planning, which is well informed by children's voices, helps to ensure that risks are reduced.
11. Responses to allegations against adults who work with children in Wandsworth are not robust, and not all concerns or situations of potential risk have been appropriately assessed or reviewed. Senior managers have now formulated a clear and credible plan of action and have taken immediate action to address and improve practice.
12. The response to 16- and 17-year-old homeless children has been variable, although there are now clear and appropriate plans in place to ensure that all children receive an improved and consistent approach to their circumstances.
13. Disabled children and their families who require social care support receive an effective, considered and proportionate service. As a result, they are provided with highly effective and tailored support that meets their needs.
14. Senior managers take appropriate and timely steps to ensure that children who are electively home educated are safeguarded. The local authority maintains clear oversight of children missing education, as was the case at the previous inspection.
15. The pupil premium grant is used effectively in order to meet the needs of the eligible cohort. It provides additional educational support and opportunities, and, as a result, children make progress.

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

16. The vast majority of children in care in Wandsworth flourish and make good progress. Children receive good care and support no matter where they live, and they see their social workers, with whom they have good, trusting relationships, regularly. However, decisions regarding when children come into care are not made quickly enough for a small number of children, meaning that their circumstances do not improve in a timely way.
17. Most children live in homes that meet their needs, alongside their brothers and sisters when appropriate. There is a strong and creative emphasis on ensuring that children continue to connect with and understand their heritage. Children are supported well to maintain safe and valuable relationships with family and friends when this is in their best interests.
18. Most children benefit from attending their meetings and reviews, and their voices and views are clearly taken into account when making key decisions. Children are seen regularly by social workers who know them well. Social workers are tenacious and creative in their endeavour to build and develop trusting and meaningful relationships with children. Workers focus clearly on understanding children's wishes, views and feelings about what is important to

them. Life-history work is thoughtfully and carefully planned. However, for a small minority of children, the start of this work is slightly delayed.

19. When children return to live with their families, there is generally a well-considered, collective and risk-assessed approach to ensuring a successful outcome. For a small minority of children, return home planning is reactive, but significant support and oversight ensure that they make progress.
20. For most children, permanence is appropriately tracked and children's journeys towards the identification and implementation of permanence are timely.
21. Children benefit from thorough initial and review health assessments. However, completion of these health assessments within prescribed timescales remains a challenge. Specialist emotional health support is available to children when required through the in-house specialist workers and other in-house therapeutic and emotional well-being services.
22. The virtual school is well led and managed. The headteacher and advisory teachers are ambitious for the children, including children educated outside the borough. Advisory teachers ensure that effective support is in place for children in care, and they set this out in high-quality personal education plans. Consequently, most children make good academic progress from their starting points.
23. Work with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is strong. The needs of these young people are well identified, and interventions are supportive and reflective of their heritage while supporting them to secure their immigration status.
24. Children are actively encouraged to take part in one of the participation groups. These groups combine a healthy mix of social activities and consideration of issues relevant to their experience in care. Their voices are heard at the corporate parenting panel, and senior managers interact positively with these groups.
25. Children and young people in Wandsworth are benefiting from an improving fostering service. Senior managers have brought about a change in structure, management and ethos. This is beginning to result in increasing numbers of foster carers. However, there is still more work to do to increase numbers in line with sufficiency plans. When foster carers need further help, they are offered bespoke packages of help and support.
26. There have been some delays in the making of adoption orders this year due to a variety of wider national influences. Despite these difficulties, an increased number of children have been placed with adopters, pending orders. Senior managers have made effective use of early permanence as a route to adoption, which supports early attachments and results in fewer moves for children.
27. The vast majority of care leavers benefit from significant levels of support, helping them to make positive progress in navigating the opportunities and challenges of adult life.

28. Care leavers are supported by dedicated personal advisers. They get to know their advisers at an early stage, and the advisers help the young people to become independent and to achieve their goals in life. The personal advisers are invested in 'their' young people; they show genuine pride in their achievements and worry for them when things are going less well.
29. Pathway plans are comprehensive and are created with and alongside young people. Most care leavers live in accommodation which is reflective of their level of need, and there is a substantial range of different forms of accommodation. However, some young people are waiting for supported accommodation to become available and some are living in temporary bedsit accommodation until more suitable permanent homes become available. Senior managers have developed a clear and creative strategic plan to improve the sufficiency of placement options and accommodation choices for young people.
30. Care leavers' health needs are well set out in pathway plans, and they are appropriately managed. Young people are supported to address their physical and emotional health needs, as well as being supported to access specialist healthcare and therapy.
31. Support for young people in custody is strong. Young people are visited frequently, they have up-to-date pathway plans and there is a focus on helping them to prepare for when they are released.
32. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers receive appropriate support to meet their needs.

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

33. Significant progress has been made by the strong, stable and child-focused leadership team in Wandsworth. Since the previous inspection, in 2018, there has been a consistent and determined focus to further develop key areas of practice. In particular, this has included early help services, adolescent safeguarding and support, services for care leavers, and the application of the chosen practice approach to support children and families. Senior managers know their service well. They know the strengths and have clear and appropriate plans in place to address and improve areas in need of further development. They strive to ensure that all children receive a consistently good service.
34. The focus and approach being used to support adolescents and to reduce risk are particularly strong. Senior managers have increased the number and types of services available to children and their families in order to assist them in developing strategies that avoid the need for statutory social care services. Council leaders, senior managers, staff and practitioners working with children and their families have embraced the chosen model of practice and associated culture, which are woven like golden threads throughout the service, with children at the heart of everything they do.

35. Senior managers have a realistic understanding of the strengths of the service and the areas that need further development. The Improvement and Transformation Board, alongside the extensive quality assurance framework, provides clarity and support that enable leaders to maintain a clear line of sight on the impact and quality of practice. However, the quality assurance systems and management oversight of some discrete areas of practice have not been sufficiently robust. Senior managers are taking credible action to review and improve practice in these areas.
36. There is a healthy culture of being child-focused, with support and challenge across the organisation that are evident at all service levels. Everyone is held to account for children's experiences and progress, within an environment of learning and a non-blame culture. The culture of appreciation, kindness, support and challenge is evident, and is present in every conversation with staff, managers and leaders.
37. The whole senior leadership team understands the priorities and needs of the children of Wandsworth. Leaders demonstrate a strong corporate commitment to achieving the best outcomes for children and families, with associated investment and financial commitment by the whole council leadership team, whose members have a sound understanding of the needs and vulnerabilities of the children in their community.
38. Leaders take their corporate parenting responsibilities very seriously and regularly speak with children and families. Children and young people are offered many different opportunities to participate in the development and creation of services and strategies. Children's participation has strengthened since the last inspection, and their views are considered at every opportunity. The participation groups have worked effectively on issues such as the Wandsworth Pledge to young people in care, and housing for care leavers, and these have influenced decisions taken at the corporate parenting panel.
39. Senior managers have been swift to embed their preferred model of the social work approach to supporting children and families. An increasing number of children and their families are now supported by specialist workers, who work alongside skilled children's social workers. This helps parents to gain insight and understanding about their behaviours that have a negative impact on their ability to care for their children. Through this individualised and intensive work, many families have been able to achieve positive change, which has improved their parenting and the quality of their relationships with their children.
40. The quality of relationships is a key driver and focus for leaders, who want each child to be supported to sustain and maintain those important lifelong links with people who are significant to them.
41. Relationships with partners have been strengthened and are improving. This has had a positive impact on the quality of referral information and early joint working. The quality of early support and intervention with children and families has improved. Engagement from police and health agencies is still variable and is not routinely present in all aspects of work, for example in the work of the Evolve team.

42. Practitioners enjoy working in Wandsworth and speak highly of feeling valued, well supported and enabled to fulfil their roles in an environment in which they feel well cared for. The recent introduction of the 'devolved budgets pilot' has enabled social workers to feel empowered in a culture of high trust and high accountability.
43. Senior managers continue to be very focused on the recruitment and stability of their workforce via the People Strategy. They have a creative and wide-reaching strategic approach which assists them in attracting the best staff, enabling them to build and sustain the workforce. Some agency staff continue to work in the service, but these are mainly long-term arrangements. Career progression pathways for qualified staff are one of the creative incentives to encourage staff to remain with Wandsworth. Manageable caseloads enable social workers to do direct and meaningful work with children. In some teams, due to turnover of staff, some workers temporarily have higher caseloads than senior managers would like.
44. Staff have access to a diverse catalogue of training and development opportunities. The offer from the social care academy is appreciated and embraced by cohorts of newly qualified social workers in their assessed and supported year in employment.

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