

Inspection of London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 11 to 15 March 2024

Lead inspector: Christine Kennet, His 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	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding

Children living in the London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham receive excellent services. Since the last inspection, highly effective and committed leaders have continued to make improvements. Children are prioritised by political and corporate leaders, who have successfully strengthened early help services and have plans for further development, with family hubs opening across the borough. Investment in one additional social work team within the assessment and support services has significantly reduced caseloads and is assisting workers to visit children more frequently and work more intensively with them and their families. The care and protection that children receive are making a difference to their lives. High aspirations and good outcomes for children in care and care leavers, and the joined-up approach of the virtual school, stand out, with exceptional work being delivered. Proactive engagement and development in partnership work are supporting stronger safeguarding and healthcare arrangements. Social workers enjoy the supportive environment that leaders have created in the borough, allowing impressive social work practice to flourish.

What needs to improve?

- The consistency of multi-agency participation in initial child protection strategy discussions.
- The pace and timeliness of work from child protection strategy discussion to initial child protection conference.

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

1. Children and families receive timely and effective early help, with support needs and risks being identified promptly by highly skilled and confident workers. Early help assessments include the child's and family's voices. They inform plans that are detailed, build on family strengths, and set out clearly what needs to happen to improve children's situations. Workers visit frequently, and they review plans collaboratively to ensure that work is progressed. Children benefit from well-planned direct work. Workers ensure that families can access a wide range of resources within the community, including, for example, services for young carers. Practice is culturally sensitive, and workers use interpreters routinely when they are needed. Regular reviews help workers continuously assess risk and consider stepping up to statutory services if necessary, ensuring that children receive the right help from the right professionals.
2. Children in need of help and protection receive a swift and coordinated response through two pathways into 'front door' services. Most contacts come via the initial consultation and advice team (ICAT), while previously unknown police contacts come via the multi-agency assessment hub (MASH), a service shared with two neighbouring boroughs. A consultation line gives prompt access to advice and discussion that are helpful to professionals and members of the public who have concerns about children. This consultation line is highly valued by professionals, who receive helpful advice, which supports children to get timely responses at the right level of service.
3. Initial screening of contacts and referrals is detailed and focused on both the concerns and areas of strength within the family. Well-established professional relationships, with co-located police officers and health workers, support appropriate triage of children's cases and prompt MASH checks when they are required. ICAT workers can send contacts to the MASH for checks if there are further emerging concerns. Accurate risk assessment in ICAT, and a clear understanding of thresholds, ensures that risk is managed appropriately and that children receive the right level of support to meet their needs. When there are potential imminent risks, safety planning is put in place with parents to ensure that children are safeguarded.
4. Senior social workers and managers understand thresholds well and explain their decision-making clearly to staff from partner agencies through regular

feedback at key stages. Accurate assessments inform the support and interventions that children need. Children receive appropriate and timely interventions which improve their situations.

5. Step-up and step-down transfers between early help and statutory services are timely and well managed, with a robust response and oversight from managers. Social workers are tenacious; they advocate effectively for children and their families, making sure that they receive the level of support they need. Skilful practitioners work with empathy and professional curiosity, taking a relationship-based approach which recognises risks and needs for children and is both respectful and protective.
6. When risks increase for children, immediate transfer to the contact and assessment service (CAS) takes place and a child protection strategy meeting is held. Most children's strategy discussions are timely and well attended, information-sharing is comprehensive and next steps are appropriate. For some children, only the police and children's social care participate, which can limit the scope for multi-agency analysis. Some recording lacks clarity about timescales, and delays to initial child protection conferences and protective plans affect a small number of children.
7. Most child protection enquiries undertaken are prompt. Children are seen quickly by social workers, who speak to them alone to understand their experiences. Workers record the outcomes of investigations with a clear rationale in most children's cases. When investigations lead to child protection conferences, most are timely. When delays occur, workers put safety plans in place for children, and managers maintain and record their oversight. Multi-agency core groups are held regularly; children experience intensive support and services through child protection arrangements.
8. Children's plans are reviewed and updated regularly. Multi-agency participation in review meetings is a strength. Clinical consultation and care planning discussions take place when children's plans are not progressing. When risks for children escalate, the Public Law Outline process is initiated, helping most parents to understand how serious the concerns are for their children.
9. Children's lived experiences are reflected well in social work assessments that are strengths based. Assessments are comprehensive and timely and include children's and parents' views, including absent parents. Children's histories are considered, and partner agency views are sought. Workers capture children's voices well and take their views into account to inform their analysis and intended outcomes. Social workers routinely use family group conferences to help children and families access support from a wider network when planning for them. Workers and families have good access to support services across the range of needs. This includes effective work with both perpetrators and victims of domestic abuse, to improve outcomes for children and families.

10. Children are supported to make progress through well-coordinated plans and social workers are able to draw on a wide range of expertise and resources to help families make changes. Social workers carry out skilled and highly sensitive work with children, using the strength of their relationships and the trust they develop to help children make good progress. Disabled children receive effective help and support from social workers. Their workers know them well, and they spend time with children to develop close relationships with them and understand their complex health and disability needs. When appropriate, social workers support children to attend meetings and contribute to decision-making.
11. When children go missing from home or are at risk of exploitation, effective multi-agency work ensures that they receive timely, coordinated responses that reduce risks and address needs. Strategy meetings take place at appropriate points, for professionals to share information and plan protective action. Strong management oversight of these situations extends to ensuring that return home interviews are offered and undertaken within appropriate timescales.
12. Children receive a timely and coordinated response from the emergency duty service. The service is well organised and staffed with experienced managers and workers who assess risk quickly and prioritise and coordinate protective responses. Handovers to daytime services are prompt and well recorded.
13. Arrangements to manage allegations against professionals are robust. Work is completed in a timely way, and the local authority designated officer provides effective guidance, support and training to the agencies involved.
14. Privately fostered children are benefiting from improved arrangements to identify any additional support that they might need. While work to raise external awareness slowed down through the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of children being identified as being privately fostered has risen again since. Internal awareness is stronger, and workers complete assessments within timescales that are appropriate for most children. There is some vulnerability in the system, with oversight being variable when the lead worker is absent.
15. Sixteen- and 17-year-old children who present as homeless receive a positive response and a helpful service. Any immediate risk to safety is addressed, to ensure that they have a safe place to stay while further assessment takes place. Advocacy services are routinely offered to explore options with children, and workers use child-in-need plans to provide good support for those children who choose not to become looked after.
16. The Family Assist team works closely with relevant multi-agency partners to provide effective support for children on the edge of care. Workers quickly establish open and honest relationships with children and families. This allows transparent and difficult conversations to take place that support families to identify, understand and address the difficulties they have. The approach ensures access to support through a range of services and helps many children to remain safely with their parents.

17. The local authority is rigorous in its oversight of the welfare of children who are educated at home, in alternative provision or missing education, including any children who are known to children's social care or who have an education, health and care plan.
18. Designated school leads speak positively about valuable and regular training from the local authority, and the timely, supportive advice they get when they have safeguarding concerns for children.
19. The borough has expanded the role of the virtual school particularly well to support all children who have a social worker. This has brought valuable additional support for schools and is having a positive impact for children and for those who work with them. This includes training for social workers on school attendance, and positive behaviour initiatives such as the 'attachment aware schools' programme.
20. Management oversight of frontline practice is a strength. High-quality, frequent supervision supports robust practice across the social work teams.

The experiences and progress of children in care: outstanding

21. Children who are in care in Hammersmith & Fulham receive outstanding care and support. Social workers get to know children really well. Manageable caseloads enable workers to do exceptional, sensitive, direct work which is attuned to children's needs and which really supports their progress. Children are visited regularly in line with their needs, and strong relationship-based work helps children to build trust with their workers. Resources are used skilfully to undertake sensitive pieces of work to support children. Life-story work is started early for all children; it is creative and well presented, allowing children to understand their backgrounds and unique identities.
22. Most children live in stable homes, increasing their security. Social workers provide carefully planned support to promote stability. When a minority of children do experience multiple placements, there is a consistent focus on what can be done to achieve stability, including the provision of specialist therapeutic support.
23. The importance of children's family time with their parents and other family members is recognised and children are well supported so this happens safely and regularly. Social workers engage parents successfully, with a view either to reunification or strengthening support for children later in life.
24. Children are actively supported to grow up within their wider family networks when they cannot live safely at home. There is robust management oversight in place for these children, who are living in kinship care arrangements which are the right place for them, and they are being well supported. Careful scrutiny by the fostering panel is improving the quality of assessments of carers and supporting good decision-making for children.

25. There is a strong focus on working in partnership with families whenever possible. This approach benefits children throughout the service, including children in care. Reunification is considered when it is safe and appropriate. Social workers maintain oversight of arrangements when family time is extended. They manage risks to children well and give families the opportunity to make changes. In some children's cases, placement with parents regulations are not considered early enough to ensure that practice and legal requirements are met. Applications to discharge care orders are timely and appropriate.
26. Arrangements for oversight of children's progress towards living in permanent homes are well planned and dynamic. Additional supports are provided and there is careful consideration of permanent matching with the right carers.
27. Additional monitoring and extra support are provided for children who are cared for under special guardianship orders, particularly during settling-in periods. The local authority supports special guardians financially and practically while they adjust to meeting children's needs. Once the order is in place, therapeutic, emotional and practical support given through the regional adoption agency (Adopt London West) helps to stabilise children's lives and supports their progress.
28. Children benefit from trusting relationships with social workers who are confident and help children to address complex and distressing trauma they have experienced, and to understand how to keep themselves safe. They seek appropriate expertise to help them plan therapeutic work.
29. The needs of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are well understood, and their needs, including those relating to cultural identity, are prioritised.
30. Children who go missing from care receive a robust safeguarding response. Workers increase their support, including safety planning with children, to address risks.
31. The virtual school is exceptionally well led, with an unwavering, laser focus on getting the relationships and support right for individual children and schools. Staff know and understand children well and they make a significant difference to their learning journeys and future pathways. The impact of their work can be seen in the positive educational outcomes that children achieve, despite the significant challenges that some of them face. Personal education plans (PEPs) are of high quality and are completed in a timely way. School leaders within and outside the local authority, with one voice, comment positively about the PEP process, describing it as well organised, meaningful and efficient.
32. Children benefit from a wide range of enrichment opportunities. The involvement of senior leaders at these events demonstrates the presence of proud 'corporate parents' supporting their children. Foster carers take children on enjoyable and stimulating holidays. Participation activities are creative, fun and much enjoyed by children. Although children have opportunities to come

together to share their views and advise and inform the corporate parenting board, they told us they are not always clear about the intended purpose or how it may have an impact on the care and support they receive.

33. Not all children receive timely initial health assessments on entering care. This is being addressed with the relevant health agencies. Children's health needs are, however, held in mind, and are met, with regular annual reviews.
34. Independent reviewing officers provide effective scrutiny of care plans and decision-making. Their footprint is evident in children's records, and reflective discussions help social workers to progress plans and understand and address challenges. Review reports are mostly written to the child and are effective in the pursuit of proposed outcomes.
35. There has been some turnover of staff in children looked after teams, so that some children have experienced changes of social worker. Children spoke about the impact of having to start again to build relationships.
36. Disabled children live in suitable homes that meet their needs. Planning for transition starts early to avoid uncertainty. Joint working with adult services and the transitions team ensures that assessments, future care options and plans are fully explored at the earliest opportunity.
37. The fostering service is evolving. Many foster carers have stayed with the local authority for many years; they are highly skilled and provide excellent care to meet children's diverse needs. Foster carers receive consistent and effective support from supervising social workers. Despite some success in recruiting new foster carers, the local authority has struggled to increase overall capacity, due to foster carers leaving the service. Leaders are well informed about the strengths and weaknesses of the service and use exit interviews to inform additional training and support. They recognise the need to further improve children's records, including the strength of the child's voice in fostering reviews.
38. Strong partnership working and engagement with the regional adoption agency (Adopt London West) supports effective adoption practice. Joint training and a focus on early permanence are particular strengths of this collaborative approach. Robust quality assurance systems inform effective decisions for children. There have been no adoption breakdowns over a sustained period. A small number of records do not show how vulnerabilities identified within carers' assessments have been mitigated.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: outstanding

39. Care leavers receive really impressive support and, as a result, most are making excellent progress. Children experience smooth transitions to their allocated leaving care workers, which enables early pathway planning and gives care leavers continuity of workers into adulthood. Social workers maintain regular

contact and visit at a frequency in line with young people's needs. Manageable caseloads mean workers have time to build strong and trusting relationships with care leavers. They are persistent and committed, and they persevere to engage care leavers who might not otherwise stay in touch. This underpins good progress for most young people.

40. When young people reach 21 years, consultation and assessment with them inform their decisions about whether they want ongoing support. Endings are warmly acknowledged and celebrated. Social workers write every year to keep in touch with care leavers whose cases are closed to the service, to make sure they know that help is available if they need it.
41. Care leavers' voices are strong in pathway plans and in recording of visits, which are full of praise, celebration and warmth. When things are going less well for young people, this is captured in caring and honest terms. High-quality pathway plans are co-produced with all care leavers, including those over 21. Pathway plans reflect care leavers' aspirations, with details of how these might be achieved. They contain essential information to help care leavers develop independence skills and to understand their rights and entitlements.
42. Care leavers are supported to access routine and specialist healthcare, adult mental health services, therapy and substance misuse services. Care leavers who have experienced trauma are supported to develop healthy strategies to manage their feelings and emotions. Life-story work continues once children have left care, with skilled workers helping them to understand their histories. This is invaluable for young people, who can use this information to find networks for the future. Social workers' confidence in advocating for their care leavers and navigating their plans is impressive. Close collaboration with adult services ensures that transitions are planned early. Social workers understand the particular needs of care leavers who are former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. They are vigilant about the potential for journey trauma, risk of trafficking and other ongoing risks.
43. Social workers are aspirational for their care leavers. They give young people positive encouragement, guidance and mentoring, to support them to go to college or attend training courses. Most care leavers are in employment, education or training; for those who are not, workers continue to support them with a range of resources. Workers in the virtual school team know their care leavers well. They give top priority to working with partner agencies to nurture and sustain young people's aspirations, life skills and further education opportunities. The virtual school is successful in looking for creative ways with key partners and local industries to open up and maximise work experience, apprenticeship and employment skills and other opportunities for young people. For example, young people who worked with the tradespeople on the creation of 'The Hub' have gone on to gaining apprenticeships.
44. The development of The Hub with and for care-experienced young people is offering a range of networking events. Staff are coordinating and running

three-day courses for the delivery of life skills and transitions work, ensuring that care-experienced young people are ready to take on their own tenancies.

45. Planning with housing services, and other relevant agencies such as the probation service, is a key strength. This approach helps to manage risk and supports a settled transition for young people into the community. Care leavers who have been exploited are well supported. Their social workers understand the risks they face and undertake a range of work with them to mitigate and prevent future risk. Workers provide direct interventions with care leavers and advocate for them with other agencies, to safeguard young people and provide the services that they need.
46. Care leavers who are in custody receive excellent support from social workers, who visit them regularly and who continue to advocate for them. Early and coordinated planning for release is a real strength.
47. The majority of care leavers are well supported to transition into suitable housing that meets their needs and is chosen in consultation with them. Progression to tenancies happens once care leavers have the skills needed to live independently. They are supported to apply for bank accounts and essential identification documents that they will need in adult life.
48. Care leavers who are parents receive frequent practical and emotional support from their social workers, to ensure that their own needs are met and that they learn parenting skills as their children grow and develop.
49. The local authority has recently refreshed the local offer, which provides strong support for care leavers. The adoption of care experience as a protected characteristic has bolstered the approach of the council as corporate parents. Care leavers feel heard and listened to, and most are well aware of their entitlements. Young people are overwhelmingly positive about the support they receive from their social workers.

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

50. A stable and quietly confident senior management team has had an outstanding impact on practice, which has remained strong, with significant further improvement achieved in many areas. Where there are areas for improvement, leaders are aware of them and are acting to address them.
51. Disaggregation from the tri-borough arrangements from April 2018, and the establishment of a sovereign local safeguarding children's partnership, have involved significant transformation, and considerable complexity. Against this background, senior leaders have successfully navigated the changes needed to sustain and strengthen services for children in the borough. They have addressed most of the areas for improvement that were identified at the last inspection and continued to build on service strengths.

52. Strong political leadership and support are reflected in an ambitious manifesto and a passion for investing in children. The strategic director is described by the chief executive officer as open and transparent about need, and as challenging regularly to ensure that resources are forthcoming for children. The cabinet member for children and education and senior leaders across the council have established clear priorities, to invest in what is needed and to raise the voices of children and young people.
53. Previously commissioned early help services have been moved back in house since the last inspection, enabling leaders to take control of planning and better track oversight of work. Leaders launched a new early intervention strategy in 2023, working across the partnership, with a funding commitment to family hubs across the borough and co-production with residents on their development. Improvements since the last inspection within early help include a summer programme for young carers, better data to track and oversee work and continued success with new family intervention programmes. Schools continue to buy services through a traded offer, with the aim of reducing the number of families requiring statutory services.
54. Leaders have supported a wide range of other innovations and improvements since the last ILACS inspection, including involvement in national and regional developments. Recent initiatives include partnership with universities to support recruitment and professional development, an inclusive and nurturing schools programme, helping lead pan-London work to improve outcomes for care leavers, a peer relational learning programme with a national young people's charity and involvement in the national benchmarking forum, as some examples. Hammersmith & Fulham has also been chosen to participate in the Department for Education Family Networks Pilot, which is launching in 2024.
55. Leaders have recognised and engaged well with health service leaders to mitigate risks for disabled children in need of help and protection ahead of diagnostic assessment. This ensures that their needs are being met while assessments are pending.
56. Leaders see the need to increase both sufficiency and stability of homes for children and are developing a therapeutic and supportive model within the borough to support foster carers. Special guardianship carers are no longer means tested for allowances and have exemption from council tax, removing financial barriers to caring for connected children.
57. Leaders have addressed the workload challenges that were evident in the CAS teams at the time of the ILACS focused visit in January 2022. They secured corporate funding to create a fourth CAS team to ease pressures on the front door. The additional capacity provided has reduced caseloads and has really benefited children, as workers have the time they need to work more effectively with families to create change.

58. Leaders are committed corporate parents. They are acutely aware of the issues of housing and sufficiency for children in care and care leavers. They have invested in three properties to be used as supported accommodation for young people in and leaving care, helping them to remain living locally.
59. Senior leaders model and support effective partnership working, with a wide range of projects in place with schools, police and housing. Impressive work in developing children's educational achievement, through the positive impact of the virtual school, extends to children on child-in-need and child protection plans, as well as children in care and care leavers. Leaders are tenacious in developing stronger relationships with health services, to increase their involvement in improving health provision for children.
60. Participation for children in care and care-experienced young people is a strength. Leaders value and encourage their input, and children's feedback has been used in relevant forums, including the corporate parenting board. A combined education and children's social care approach offers children many opportunities, including camping, creative writing, and residential and outdoor water activities. Elected members advocate strongly for children in their care and make clear their wish to offer all the opportunities that their peers who live with their own families might experience.
61. Leaders are ambitious for the workforce and continue to maintain the training and support that has made practitioners so effective. There is a wide range of learning opportunities, including practice weeks, learning from serious case reviews, audits, feedback and complaints. Audits are delivered via reflective case discussions with practitioners, giving staff the opportunity to learn through discussion.
62. Hammersmith & Fulham adopted a systemic practice model in 2014, and a significant proportion of the workforce has undertaken systemic training courses. The systemic model is supported by an embedded clinical team, whose members' impact is evident in practice with children and families across the social work teams.
63. Social workers talk positively about career progression opportunities and about the training and development offer. They are supported to learn useful skills for direct work with families.
64. There is a mature learning culture within the local authority, and skills and experiences are widely shared. Support for assessed and supported year in employment (ASYE) and student social workers is strong. They are encouraged to develop by undertaking work that stretches them, with good management support and reduced caseloads in place.
65. Governance and accountability arrangements give councillors and cabinet members a direct line of sight into frontline services and practice. Oversight and reporting give directors and chief officers key tools to question and review

practice, ensuring scrutiny and holding senior leaders to account. The accuracy with which leaders know their services is impressive.

66. Regular meetings between the chief executive officer, the lead member, the strategic director and other members of the senior leadership team support regular and effective scrutiny, ensuring that the chief executive officer is well sighted on the most vulnerable children. Performance data is both powerful and reassuring.
67. Leaders and practitioners want to learn and understand from audit activity about what is being done well and areas for improvement. Regular audit findings of effective frontline work in a large majority of children's cases are consistent with the inspection findings. Audit workshops have helped managers to achieve consistency in their evaluation and grading in audits.
68. Leaders recognise that the workforce is the local authority's biggest asset. They have delivered a comprehensive development and support package for staff. Social workers consistently say they are happy to be working in the borough and describe positive support from managers.
69. The action senior leaders have taken to increase capacity within the CAS teams has had a positive impact on caseloads. Social workers enjoy being able to practice good-quality, relational social work with children and families, and feel that they can maintain a good standard of work, while balancing self-care.
70. Social workers feel well supported, not just by their immediate managers, but by senior leaders whom they describe as 'credible'. Workers are encouraged to attend training and this time is prioritised for them. They talk about the flexibility they are given to pursue other career ambitions, and the importance placed on well-being days.
71. There is strong investment in the care of the workforce, and recognition that retention and recruitment of social workers is a national challenge. Retention is positive and social workers are loyal to the borough. Staff have access to vicarious trauma workshops to help prevent burnout and compassion fatigue.
72. Leaders recognise there are limited progression opportunities due to stable management. They have developed a career progression scheme, with opportunities for promotion and specialist lead roles across the region.
73. Leaders recognise that, nurturing and investing in newly qualified social workers and ASYE workers is particularly important. They have worked in partnership with the West London Alliance of local authorities and with the University of Hertfordshire to run the Step up to Social Work programme.
74. Wider continued professional development (CPD) for experienced social workers is delivered via the West London Alliance CPD programme, offering a range of opportunities. Leaders have also created pathways into management training, and a programme of development support for Black and Asian leaders.

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