

Inspection of Royal Borough of Greenwich local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 3 to 7 June 2024

Lead inspector: Tom Anthony, 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

Corporate and political leaders have made improvements to the quality and impact of support provided to children in Greenwich. Services are now more effective than they were at the time of the last inspecting local authority children's services (ILACS) inspection in 2019. Leaders use a variety of quality assurance activity and a comprehensive suite of performance information, as well as listening to feedback from their children, families and workforce, to ensure that they have an up-to-date and realistic understanding of the quality and impact of the services they provide.

Highly effective partnership working with housing colleagues, schools, youth services and children's centres, as well as mental and physical health services, helps children and their families receive the right support at the right time. Collaborative multi-agency working is making a difference to children and young people's lives and helps to limit the demand for more intensive statutory provision.

What needs to improve?

- The identification of young carers and the quality of support provided to them.
- Consistently impactful management oversight, direction and supervision of frontline practice.

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

1. An extremely well-managed and efficient multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) ensures that contacts from the public or professionals are met with a timely and appropriate response. Risks are recognised and when an urgent response is required, prompt and appropriate action is taken. There are well-established processes to ensure work is progressed at pace, with appropriate management oversight and direction.
2. Social workers rapidly undertake agency checks and analyse any previous contacts and involvements to help them build an understanding of family life. They have a high level of awareness of the risks that children can experience, both inside and outside their homes. Workers demonstrate a good level of curiosity about children's lives. This enables them to identify risks for individual children.
3. A strong and effective range of early help services, including the targeted Family and Adolescent Support Service (FaASS), enables children and their families to receive coordinated multi-agency support that helps their situations to improve. Workers in the FaASS visit children and parents frequently, to build trust and develop plans that reflect families' own assessments of what help they need. Staff draw on a range of services and approaches so that their work is tailored to the needs of each child and family. Working jointly with other services, families are skilfully helped to address long-standing or complex needs, to identify goals and to develop strategies to enable them to achieve and sustain change.
4. Knowledgeable and experienced specialist workers respond effectively when there are concerns about children outside office hours. Recording by these workers is thorough and detailed, and provides daytime services with the right information to be able to follow up actions and make informed decisions about next steps.
5. When private fostering arrangements are identified, they are progressed swiftly for assessment. Permanence for these children is considered at the earliest opportunity and progressed through special guardianship orders (SGOs) and supported child arrangement orders (CAOs) when this is the right decision for children. Children's cultural and identity needs are considered in assessments.

6. The responses to 16 and 17-year-olds presenting as homeless are strong. Investment in a jointly funded housing social worker post has improved the consistency and quality of practice and support available to this vulnerable group of children.
7. When children are at risk of significant harm, well-attended and well-recorded strategy meetings are used effectively to share information and assess immediate risks and concerns. These meetings are effective in deciding if the threshold is met for section 47 enquiries, as well as planning any immediate next steps to keep children safer.
8. Children and families are swiftly allocated to social workers once the decision has been taken to undertake a child and family assessment.
9. Most assessments are thorough in their exploration of children's needs. Risks are identified, and actions to improve children's lives are proportionate. Workers include both parents in assessments to understand the role they play in the lives of their children. In stronger assessments, this leads to the strengths of both parents being used to minimise risk for children. The quality of assessments and pre-birth planning in Greenwich is consistently strong.
10. Staff have a well-developed understanding of the signs and impact of domestic abuse, substance misuse and parental mental health difficulties. Social workers prioritise speaking to potential victims to rapidly analyse the level of risk and to help establish safety plans. This, coupled with a high level of management oversight and direction, means that there is a swift and focused response for children.
11. Social workers have a good understanding of local resources that are available to support children and families. When appropriate, a designated officer supports social workers to attend well-established fortnightly multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC) meetings, to share information about children who are vulnerable and to identify resources that will improve children's safety.
12. Children are visited swiftly to see them in their living environment and gain their views. Social workers make positive use of a range of tools to help their understanding of children's lives and to inform decisions regarding risk. Systemic genograms, increasingly used with families, help children and their families reflect on their key relationships and experiences.
13. Child-in-need and child protection plans consider the needs of the child alongside risk factors, and are clear in setting out what is needed to safeguard children and provide effective support. Core group and child-in-need review meetings are attended by parents and professionals and are used well to assess progress and amend plans to reduce risks for children.

14. Oversight by child protection chairs is evident on children's records. They review the progress of plans and seek updates from key people to assess the progress children are making. Challenge is recorded where plans are not progressing in timescales appropriate for the child. However, contingency planning in child protection plans needs to be more explicit.
15. Social workers make sure that children who are identified as being on the edge of care have access to a range of resources and support. This includes the use of the Adolescent Assessment Resource Residential Centre (AARRC) and the pilot Step Up Step Down scheme being delivered by the fostering service. This offers families support from an experienced foster carer, to visit and support them and offer short-term care when required.
16. For a small number of children, a lack of focus on their experiences and the recognition of cumulative harm has resulted in them remaining for too long in situations where their needs are not met and they experience harm. Decisions for these children to come into care have not been swift enough.
17. A weekly entry-to-care panel helps to identify resources to support families, and means senior managers approve decisions for children to come into care.
18. Leaders have taken action to improve the use of Public Law Outline (PLO) pre-proceedings. Decisions to step children's cases up to this tier of activity are made with agreement of senior managers at legal planning meetings. There is a comprehensive and regular system of management oversight for these children through monthly tracking meetings, aided by the input of a court progression manager.
19. There is an effective multi-agency approach to responding to children who are vulnerable to criminal and sexual exploitation or those who go missing. Return home conversations are carried out with children when they have been missing, and staff are persistent in trying to engage with children to build relationships and divert them from risks.
20. Disabled children receive support that reflects their needs, built around the ability of their family to safeguard them and provide the right care. A firm focus is maintained on the safety of children.
21. The local authority maintains an up-to-date list of children missing education (CME). An experienced and knowledgeable officer leads the work to identify these children. There is good liaison with schools to check that they have taken all reasonable action to identify the whereabouts of children not attending their setting. Staff are persistent in their inquiries and, where necessary, support families well to secure a school place. When staff are unable to locate children, they appropriately refer them to MASH.

22. Through an elective home education (EHE) officer, the local authority assesses effectively the risks to children who are more vulnerable. They rightly prioritise direct work with these children and families and liaise effectively with social workers and others, such as youth justice, so they have an up-to-date picture of children's circumstances.
23. Effective systems are in place to respond in a timely way to allegations and concerns about adults who work with children. There are effective links with staff involved in safeguarding processes in respect of individual children and local authority designated officer (LADO) meetings identify potential risks to other children from the adults who are being considered.
24. To date, only a very small number of children have been identified as young carers. More needs to be done to raise awareness and identify children with caring responsibilities and to provide them with appropriate support.

The experiences and progress of children in care: outstanding

25. Most children come into care in Greenwich at the right time. They make impressive progress and many thrive once in care. Children live in stable homes. Effective placement matching means that many children remain living long term with their first foster carers.
26. The wishes and feelings of children, and those of their parents, are set out in timely assessments and applications to court. Assessments of family members as potential kinship carers are carried out promptly and to a high standard.
27. Dedicated in-house emergency fostering placements are kept available for children who enter care out of hours. This helps reduce the trauma of coming into care. Children move in with carers who are local and are ready to respond and meet their needs at short notice.
28. Children have told their workers that they feel safe and secure in their homes. The stability children experience provides them with a secure base and they are encouraged to pursue interests and to do well in their education. They live with carers who know them well and provide them with consistent care.
29. When children enter care, workers pay good attention to their individual needs. Detailed placement plans are swiftly put in place, initial health assessments are completed on time and independent reviewing officers (IROs) are allocated to oversee their care plans and ensure that plans set out clearly how children's needs will be met.
30. Social workers visit children regularly, using direct work to help them understand children's wishes and feelings. Purposeful life-story work, written with the child in mind, helps children's individual identity to be captured and

celebrated. Good use is made of digital platforms, where photos and memories are kept safe and secure for children to access in later life.

31. Children's care plans are detailed and specific about their needs. They set out how they will be supported to maintain good health and do well in their learning. Children spend time with family and friends, and workers think carefully about children's relationships with brothers and sisters. Plans consider permanency options, placing children's needs at the centre of decision-making. These plans have clear management oversight.
32. Children are sensitively prepared for, and carefully matched with, permanent carers. Their wishes and feelings influence the decisions made about where they live. Children are helped to develop secure attachments with the adults caring for them, and are helped to understand their life histories, experiences and identities.
33. Children in care placed out of the area receive the same level of service as those who live in Greenwich. Visits to these children are made in line with statutory requirements and more frequently when needed or requested by children. Visits are supplemented by daily phone calls to children who want or need extra contact. Regular contact by IROs is also evident on the records of children who are placed out of area.
34. Rigorous assessments are undertaken and appropriately signed off before children are returned home to the care of their parents. Social workers maintain frequent contact with children in these arrangements. IRO agreement to reunification plans is recorded on children's records. When children opt to return home when this is not part of the local authority plan, their placements are kept open for up to three months while workers assure themselves that these new arrangements meet children's needs.
35. A swift and thoughtful service is provided to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. They are registered with GPs, dentists and opticians within a week of arrival. Social workers complete comprehensive assessments and sensitively consider the trauma children have experienced, as well as their cultural and language needs.
36. Improvements have been made to the quality and impact of IRO oversight since the ILACS inspection in 2019. IROs oversee care plans and ensure timely reviews are held. IROs support children to engage in review meetings with the support of interpreters or advocates and ensure their voice is heard. There are proportionate midway reviews from IROs.
37. Letters to children in care following their reviews are written sensitively, with humour where appropriate, and acknowledge children's contributions, their feelings and frustrations. They capture the key discussion points and any actions agreed. These are translated for children who speak English as an

additional language to ensure all children can respond if they do not think the letter is an accurate reflection of their meeting.

38. The work of the virtual school is well integrated into the wider work of children's services. Staff know children well and provide good oversight of the attendance and progress of looked after children. They assess and understand the risks to children and focus their efforts on those with higher-level needs. They adapt plans and provision quickly as children's circumstances change. This supports the progress and attendance of looked after children, including unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and those living outside the borough. Most looked after children have good school attendance and make good progress in their learning.
39. The virtual school uses activities beyond the classroom to engage children and young people. Children benefit enormously from The Funwork Club, where much more than just homework and learning takes place.
40. The fostering service in Greenwich continues to develop new ways to recruit and support carers. Leaders understand the importance of a robust recruitment strategy to help provide more local foster families for Greenwich children. Assessments of carers have improved in terms of their depth and analysis. Strengths, vulnerabilities and relevant factors in applicants' backgrounds are well explored and, most importantly, the impact of these on carers' capacity to care effectively for vulnerable children is thoroughly assessed.
41. For children who are now waiting for adoptive families, the timeliness of family finding is much improved. There is strong partnership working between the regional adoption agency, Adopt London South, and Greenwich. While there have been no adoption breakdowns in the past few years, there is more to do to improve the timeliness of post-adoption support.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: outstanding

42. Care leavers in Greenwich receive an outstanding service. Impressive personal advisers (PAs) know their young people extremely well and speak with compassion, care and knowledge about them. A stable leaving care workforce enables meaningful long-term relationships to be developed with many young people.
43. PAs maintain regular face-to-face contact with young people. When needed, managers go with workers on visits to care leavers, ensuring staff are supported to navigate difficult and complex situations. The local authority makes strenuous efforts to remain in contact with care leavers who are no longer in touch. They frequently seek to make contact to remind care leavers of their entitlement to ongoing support.

44. To ensure care leavers' needs are fully understood and considered, their needs assessments are separated from their pathway plans before they are allocated to workers in the leaving care service. This has been highly effective in keeping a focus on risk, need and harm.
45. Detailed pathway plans are used to work meaningfully alongside young people to agree their levels of need and establish bespoke support plans. Care leavers are provided with important documents as they reach adulthood. When these are missing, strenuous efforts are made to help young people access them.
46. There is a strong focus on supporting care leavers to maintain their physical and emotional health. Intelligent and effective joint work with the mental health early intervention team provides timely and effective support to care leavers experiencing mental health difficulties.
47. PAs know how important education is and they support young people to engage in learning and employment opportunities. Care leavers in Greenwich are not allowed to not consider education.
48. The Greenwich mentoring programme provides one-to-one support to care leavers and a dedicated 18+ virtual school officer provides support to advisers and care leavers to help access and maintain education and training.
49. Care leavers are supported to access and maintain suitable accommodation, including in 'staying put' arrangements. There is an impressive housing pathway in Greenwich. This strong example of the commitment of housing colleagues ensures speedy access to tenancies once care leavers are assessed as being ready to manage their own property.
50. Young people benefit from a comprehensive Greenwich leaving care offer that includes council tax exemption up to the age of 25, regardless of where they live. It reflects the priority and commitment given to care leavers in Greenwich, who have recently been awarded protected characteristic status.
51. PAs understand the value of relationships for young people and are relentless in helping them re-establish and keep connections to family members and other people who are important to them. PAs act as strong advocates for care leavers in prison, who are visited regularly and provided with credible support to remain resilient and engaged. PAs keep them in touch with their families, contacts and social networks, even when they have received lengthy custodial sentences.
52. Care leavers who are parents receive focused support, including a monthly support group based at a soft play venue that provides them and their children with an opportunity to develop friendships and networks of support. PAs work well with social workers supporting the children of care leavers, helping these vulnerable parents to care for their children.

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

53. Political and corporate leaders in Greenwich work tirelessly with partners to improve children's lives. Leaders have a realistic and up-to-date understanding of the support that they provide. They use an array of quality assurance and audit activity, alongside detailed performance indicators, to take action to meet children's needs. They have created additional teams to provide high-quality support to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and care leavers. The decision to fund eight well-being hubs in schools across the borough is one example of resources being allocated to prioritise children's emotional well-being. It demonstrates leaders' ability to take action and develop innovative services with key partners.
54. Partnership working is strong at both strategic and operational level, and is making a difference to children and young people's lives. The quality of referrals and feedback provided by school designated safeguarding leads confirms a high level of understanding and confidence about thresholds for intervention in Greenwich. Both the judiciary and the Child and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) were positive about their confidence in decision-making and planning for children in the borough.
55. Leaders are unapologetically ambitious corporate parents. The deliberate use of 'partnership' in the title of the Corporate Parenting Partnership Board captures the responsibility of the whole council and partner agencies to prioritise support to children in care and care leavers. It is a significant achievement that leaders in Greenwich have been able to find sufficient homes for all children in care. At the time of this inspection, there were no children living in unregistered children's homes.
56. Leaders are outward-looking and agile in their approach to service development. They use outcomes from inspections to focus on further improvement in the services that are provided to children and their families. They have developed a range of services to support children on the edge of care. These include support delivered by allocated foster carers to families who are struggling, a specialist residential resource centre and community-based programmes to work with both victims and perpetrators of domestic abuse.
57. Workforce retention rates in Greenwich are impressive. Frontline practitioners value the regular opportunities they are provided with to undertake training to enhance their knowledge and continue to embed a coherent approach to supporting children and their families in Greenwich.
58. Children and families benefit because leaders are determined to create the conditions for successful practice for the workforce. The frequency, recording and quality of supervision of frontline practice are now considerably stronger in the MASH and for children in care and care leavers than they were in 2019.

59. Caseloads across children's services are successfully managed and kept low. This provides staff with the time to build effective and often long-term relationships with children and their families. These trusting relationships are fundamental to the ability of workers to support sustainable change and improvement in children's lives.
60. Leaders take their responsibility to promote the well-being of staff seriously. Practice meetings, easily accessible clinical support and flexible support to workers who are parents all contribute to workforce stability in the borough.
61. There is a strong sense of loyalty expressed by the staff working for the local authority to support children and families in Greenwich. Many staff who have left to work elsewhere have returned to work for Greenwich.
62. Inspectors met with a number of impressive children, care leavers and paid young advisers who play an important role in holding leaders to account for the decisions that they make, and the services they provide. They provide vibrant evidence of leaders' renewed commitment to listening to the voices of children and care leavers to inform the development and improvement of services in Greenwich.

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.gov.uk/ofsted

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