

Inspection of Redbridge local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 10 to 14 June 2024

Lead inspector: Brenda McLaughlin, His Majesty's Inspector

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

Children in Redbridge continue to benefit from high-quality support, help and protection over time. The local authority has a sustained record of strong performance in children's services. Its commitment to continuous improvement has resulted in high-quality services that matter most to children when they need them. Services for children in care and care leavers have improved since the last inspection in 2019.

Leaders and managers successfully provide the scaffolding that enables staff to feel safe and for exemplary practice to flourish. They have repeatedly taken the right steps to meet children's increasingly complex needs and rising demands. They have actively facilitated a range of evidence-based improvements, which are making a discernible difference to helping vulnerable children, young adults and families make and sustain positive change.

Listening to children, understanding their lived experiences and acting on their views are strongly embedded in practice.

What needs to improve?

- Challenge and support to partner agencies to improve the quality and timeliness of multi-agency referral forms (MARF).
- Consistent parental consent to share information in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) for children who do not meet child protection thresholds.

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

1. Children and families in Redbridge receive the right help and protection at the right time. A 'one worker, one family and one plan' approach helps parents and professionals to navigate early help services. The lead practitioner has access to relevant information to provide support to the whole family. Children benefit from exceptional early help provided by skilled professionals in the family together hubs (FTH), who identify and respond swiftly to concerns.
2. The common assessment framework (CAF) tool is used successfully by the FTH to assess families' needs. Schools acting as the lead professional are supported well by dedicated schools' CAF coordinators. A highly effective network of services, underpinned by a locally agreed practice framework, helps children, young people and families below the threshold of statutory child protection to access help at the earliest opportunity. This is preventing harm from escalating.
3. Professionals understand underlying issues affecting families, such as poverty, debt, parental conflict, drug and alcohol abuse and homelessness. Their work is strengths based, listening and empowering parents to make and sustain changes. This is minimising the impact of trauma on children. Cohesive partnership working and bespoke targeted teams help to meet children's increasingly complex and diverse needs. For instance, the Harmony early help team delivers effective support to families experiencing domestic abuse, child physical abuse, neglect and child criminal exploitation. Thresholds between early help and social care services are understood well.
4. Persistent work by experienced and knowledgeable social care staff and managers in the MASH ensures that children at immediate risk of harm are responded to promptly. Children at risk are transferred directly to the child protection assessment teams (CPAT). However, the poor quality of MARF information recorded by some professionals and delay in submitting referrals to the MASH cause avoidable delay for a small number of children. This creates additional work for social workers to ensure that they have the necessary information to inform decisions. Parental consent to share information for some children who do not meet the threshold of significant harm is not consistent.

5. The inclusion of an early help triage team in the MASH has reinforced proportionate decision-making and early intervention. Specialist domestic abuse workers from the Reach Out team carry out enhanced screening using safe lives, domestic abuse, stalking and honour-based violence (DASH) risk assessments. Working alongside the MASH, they deliver effective safety planning with survivors of abuse, connecting the whole family to specialist support. This includes support with financial issues, welfare and benefits, housing, physical and mental health, substance misuse and immigration. Reach Out also swiftly refers children and young people affected by domestic abuse to relevant services. They hold perpetrators to account by providing behaviour change interventions that reduce risk to children.
6. Joint fortnightly meetings in the MASH with safeguarding midwives ensure that risk is monitored and appropriate action is taken early in pregnancy for unborn babies and their mothers. Excellent work by social workers in the unborn baby team ensures that vulnerable parents are provided with effective and sensitive interventions. Permanence plans for babies who will not be able to live safely with their birth families are progressed appropriately.
7. The emergency duty service provides an effective and timely response and communicates regularly with day services. In addition, timely referrals are made for children at risk of radicalisation and exploitation, resulting in joint and proportionate help and protection.
8. The response to 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless is timely. Assessments consistently consider children's safety, emotional well-being and their educational goals. Workers ensure that their accommodation is near to their school or college.
9. Advocacy is available through a commissioned service for all children and care leavers. This enables children to share their views independently and seek legal advice if required.
10. Rigorous management oversight and interventions in the MASH and across teams ensure that children's experiences are consistently central to timely decisions about the steps needed to help and protect them from harm.
11. Purposeful child-centred assessments and plans in the CPAT and the community social worker teams fully explore and analyse current and previous needs and risks for the whole family. Strategy meetings and child protection enquiries are thorough and involve relevant agencies. Children are seen alone when appropriate. Proportionate interventions commence quickly, augmented by clear management direction and effective supervision.
12. In most cases, effective and sensitive direct work helps children to talk about their worries and feelings and for workers to find out what they want to change. Children's views and experiences inform plans. Plans involve

appropriate agencies and are developed and coordinated through regular meetings and core groups. Clear and accessible language in child protection and children in need plans enables families to understand what needs to change. Staff work skilfully to understand and include parental and family histories and their diverse cultures and norms, as well as the impact on parents of poor mental health, domestic abuse, poverty and insecure housing. Social workers work skilfully with other professionals, thoughtfully reviewing and evaluating the impact that these and other vulnerabilities have on parents, while keeping a clear focus on children's needs and safety.

13. When difficulties in families are more serious and complex, the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline is used constructively to help parents understand and make required changes. Parenting, family kinship and expert assessments are commissioned in parallel to reduce delay for children. The designated family judge reported positively about strengths in pre-proceedings work and the quality of social work practice, which supports effective decision-making for children. Collaborative work with the judiciary, neighbouring local authorities and the Portman Clinic actively supports families to engage with the East London family drug and alcohol court.
14. Disabled children receive a highly individualised service from social workers who know them well. Children at risk are visited regularly and are seen alone. Observations of children and the care given to them are detailed and inform a dynamic assessment of their needs. A revised and enhanced young carers' strategy, co-produced with a large number of young carers, provides access to school holiday clubs, residential holidays, therapeutic support through school and short-break services. Brothers and sisters of disabled children access young carers' support through the disabled children team.
15. Prompt intelligence-sharing and mapping of perpetrators in the exploited children intelligence team quickly identify children affected by serious youth violence and sexual and criminal exploitation. Impressive practice with exploited children and young people by skilled workers in the family intervention team (FIT) and Engage teams is reducing risks to children at an early stage and protecting them from further harm. Experienced social work practitioners adapt their work to meet emerging needs. Collaborating with partner agencies, they target risk factors and use a strengths-based approach with children and their families to achieve change. Needs and risks are prioritised and seen in the broader context of wider family networks. One-to-one work and group work are delivered in schools and other educational settings. Practitioners use virtual reality tools creatively to help exploited children make informed decisions. Plans and direct work are strongly informed by children's individual identity, culture and ethnicity, and they successfully drive forward positive change. The Engage service visits all young people in custody, building trusting relationships and implementing plans that help to prevent the further exploitation of young adults on their release from prison.

16. When children go missing from home or from care, specialist workers carry out detailed return home interviews. They listen to children and act to prevent further episodes.
17. When children are missing education, intelligence is gathered swiftly and children and families are tracked in the United Kingdom and across the world to confirm their location and safety. The complexities of individual children are understood and prioritised.
18. For those children who are electively home educated, effective procedures for gathering information, risk assessing and scrutiny ensure that face-to-face meetings are held with the most vulnerable children. Proactive work carried out in partnership with parents and carers ensures that children are encouraged and supported to attend school.

The experiences and progress of children in care: outstanding

19. Children in care receive outstanding care and support. Children come into care when necessary to keep them safe and meet their needs. Extensive options are thoroughly explored, and support is provided to enable children to remain with their birth families or extended networks if safe to do so. Permanence planning is initiated immediately, including the potential for return to their birth families.
20. Children are matched appropriately with family members or special guardians, allowing children to remain safely with carers who are important to them. Robust oversight by leaders at all levels, regular statutory reviews and listening to children's views ensure that opportunities for reunification with family members are held in mind and supported at all stages of the child's journey in care.
21. The rapidly changing profile of older children and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children entering care is adeptly predicted, ensuring their needs are successfully anticipated and addressed. Since the last inspection, the fostering service has continued to perform strongly. Sufficiency of foster carers is a strength, supported by very effective recruitment and retention of foster carers, which is helping children live in stable homes with carers who are valued. A sharp focus on trauma-informed training and development means that carers and support staff can develop the skills needed to work with children with a range of complex needs. Impressively, the number of carers in the authority continues to increase. This is a significant achievement, helping to ensure that a high proportion of children are placed within, or close to, the borough, enabling them to attend school locally and stay in touch with friends and other people who are important to them.
22. Frequent visits by social workers who know children well and help them understand their care experience are intrinsic to maintaining stable homes for children in care. Manageable caseloads ensure that staff have the time to build

trusting relationships with children and their kinship and foster carers. Children said their social workers are responsive, dependable, helpful and kind. They can talk to them about their concerns and ambitions and are confident that their social workers will listen and help them. Children enjoy similarly strong relationships with their carers.

23. Effective corporate and individual planning for children in care are apparent through low rates of placement breakdowns. The provision of high-quality, well-matched stable homes and suitable supported accommodation is commissioned and quality assured by dedicated staff. Most children live with carers who meet their diverse ethnic and cultural needs. Where additional support is required, a range of resources are available through social workers. These include in-house clinical therapeutic support workers who work directly with children who are experiencing emotional and mental health difficulties, provide consultation to professionals, including carers, and liaise with child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) and other therapeutic services. This is especially helpful to children who are placed out of borough or who experience unavoidable placement moves. Children living out of area or in custody are visited regularly by their social workers, who speak warmly and with confidence about their progress.
24. A dedicated team of practitioners supports unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Intensive language support is provided to new arrivals. They live in safe and culturally matched homes and are supported to gain employment and to access higher education.
25. Care plans consider all aspects of children's lives. Risks to children are understood and managed well, with tailored support provided that is based on assessed need. Leaders show exceptional foresight, proactively having oversight of risks around the high number of children placed in Redbridge by other boroughs, as these impact on Redbridge children, for example in shared placements. Independent reviewing officers scrutinise children's progress between statutory reviews. This provides additional independent safeguards and ensures that plans for children are not delayed. Despite efforts by staff, health reviews and dental checks are not completed within timescale for all children, which is linked to the availability of health professionals.
26. Children in care and care leavers are supported by a strong and effective virtual school and receive high-quality educational provision. While some cohorts perform better than others, the support children receive has a positive impact on their achievement. Child-focused personal education plans are relevant and timely, and they are viewed positively by children and by schools. Designated teachers and other school leaders are positive about the wider work of the virtual school. They said the virtual school is 'responsive', 'very quick to get back to us', and 'will always work directly with students when needed'. Pride is taken in children's achievements. All children are supported in their leisure

interests, and many enjoy stimulating holidays with their carers or in activity groups.

27. Adoption and kinship care are carefully and swiftly considered for all children at the earliest indication that they cannot live with their birth families. Successful regional adoption arrangements with Coram Ambitious for Adoption are increasing the number of adopters in Redbridge, providing wider adopter choice. Effective tracking and monitoring processes are in place to ensure children do not experience unnecessary delay. Adoptive parents describe feeling validated and listened to throughout their journey to become adopters. Social work practice is consistently strong, with sensitively written reports that are rightly realistic. Post-adoption order support is creative, prompt and tailored to address the needs of all members of the family.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: outstanding

28. Following the last inspection, corporate and operational leaders collaborated with partner agencies to evaluate the quality of help, care and support provided to care leavers. They took the decision in 2020 to bring the previously commissioned service in house. Expansion of the service, with increased capacity and clear practice standards, has strengthened the quality of practice with care leavers, creating a culture of excellent support for young people and staff.
29. Early transition planning supports most young people to stay safe in suitable accommodation, access training and employment and develop skills towards independence. Personal advisers (PAs) work tirelessly with the virtual school to support young people to enter training and employment. Driving lessons and tests are paid for to enhance young people's employability. While some cohorts perform better than others, a comparatively high number of care leavers attend university. They are provided with wraparound financial support and accommodation.
30. PAs encourage young people to use the support services available to them, and they make appropriate referrals, including to Work Redbridge and the Department for Work and Pensions, who are co-located with the care leavers team for part of the week. Eight young people are currently supported by local businesses in apprenticeships.
31. Care leavers who are in custody receive the same level of service as any other care leavers, including regular visits, and are supported with other needs, for example mental health support, financial help and post-release planning.
32. Tenacious and respectful work by PAs helps children and young people to manage their priorities and expectations. Persistent and creative efforts are made to stay connected with care-experienced young adults. Young people are visited every six weeks, or more often if required. Good use of web-based apps

ensures that care leavers receive regular information about events and their entitlements. Leaders have identified that this is an area they want to strengthen further and have appointed previous Redbridge care leavers as engagement officers.

33. Pathway plans are co-produced with care leavers and are detailed, personalised and ambitious. They include full consideration of children's neurodiversity, their identity, ethnicity and religious and cultural heritage. They provide information about children's views and their short- and longer-term goals. Plans provide a realistic analysis of risk, and the level of support and resources required are kept up to date. Young people are supported by staff who know them well, sometimes over several years, to make progress towards independence at a pace that is right for them. PAs actively encourage care leavers to maintain relationships with family, carers and others who are important to them.
34. The availability of secure and stable housing in London is a challenge. Corporate leaders and elected members have made leaving care a protected characteristic, enhancing care leavers' rights and entitlements. Joint planning with social workers begins early, and co-located housing officers ensure that children are registered for social housing following their 16th birthday. This allows them to accrue two years on the housing waiting list, which leads to opportunities for those who want and are ready to move into permanent housing to do so at an earlier stage following their 18th birthday. Children are directly involved in choosing their accommodation, supported by their social workers, PAs, carers and relevant agencies. A housing officer visits provision to ensure it is of a good enough standard.
35. Risk to vulnerable young adults is understood. Collaborative transition planning with adult services provides detailed risk assessments and plans. These identify the support required and who is responsible for providing it. For instance, joint work with community safety teams and networking with agencies, such as probation, ensure that mapping and intelligence-sharing are robustly updated and provide protection for young adults at risk of exploitation and for those in custody. Young people with poor mental health and those with substance misuse issues are supported by key workers in supported accommodation until they can live independently.
36. Care leavers who are parents or are expecting a baby are supported financially and emotionally to prepare for caring for their children. This includes those young parents who live out of area. Effective liaison with multi-agency partners secures support for the unborn child and for the parents if safeguarding concerns are identified. Joint working is commenced appropriately, and community support is also secured to provide quick access to services.
37. Corporate parenting arrangements are exceptionally strong, and priorities are informed by the views of children in care and care leavers. The wider council is a signatory to the care leavers' covenant. Young people who met with

inspectors talked about their role advising senior leaders on service delivery for young people who are leaving care. They participated in round-table leadership events to jointly compile the care leavers' covenant. They feel heard by leaders, who act to implement changes that are important to them, and proudly shared how these have made a difference. They are given membership of local gyms, and council tax is paid for all care leavers, irrespective of where they live. A cross-council governance board led by the chief executive drives continuous improvement.

38. Young people have successfully lobbied for the creation of a care leavers' hub. They spoke about the significance of having a space they can access with others to share experiences, reduce isolation and to access activities and services that are dispersed at present. Leaders say this is being actively pursued and that accommodation has been identified.

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

39. Since the last inspection in 2019, leaders have sustained and enhanced their already strong children's services. A palpable commitment to improvement and innovation has allowed excellent practice to develop and flourish. Consequently, children and young people benefit from exemplary help, care and protection across all teams and services, from early help to adoption and leaving care.
40. Mature strategic relationships enable leaders to set high expectations and standards for each other and their staff. Leaders have deliberately adopted a policy of 'grow your own' across teams and services. They recognise and nurture talent and model good practice by focusing on what matters to children. A diverse workforce that reflects the local community is a real strength, leading to better engagement by children, young people and their parents. This is also increasing staff retention and stability.
41. Senior leaders and managers have a good understanding of the needs of Redbridge's population and of the demands involved in delivering services to highly mobile and diverse communities within the constraints of finite budgets. They engage partners with an open and inclusive approach to bring services together. This supports effective integrated work across early help and in the MASH, and between staff and professionals across statutory teams.
42. Politicians and leaders have shared objectives and plans and actively pilot and implement new best practice initiatives. For example, Redbridge's successful bid to be a Department for Education (DfE) pathfinder reflects leaders' commitment to working differently in partnership with other agencies, children and parents. Shared priorities are communicated clearly. Leaders have repeatedly taken the right steps by providing services that matter most to children when they need them.

43. Redbridge is an ambitious learning organisation. Intensive induction and continuous learning are supported at every level. A wide range of training is on offer through the Redbridge Safeguarding Children Partnership and is underpinned by frequent and targeted learning from case reviews and audits.
44. Workers, including newly qualified social workers, consistently told inspectors that Redbridge is 'a great place to work', where they feel safe, listened to by highly visible managers and supported well in their practice. Caseloads are manageable, giving staff the space and time to get to know children and families very well. A conscious decision to have staff working together in the office has helped to build a culture of conspicuous care and oversight. Management oversight and direction at the point of allocation are strengths, with most staff receiving regular and reflective supervision which provides them with clear direction, confidence and a shared ownership of risk.
45. An exceptional and rigorous strengths-based performance framework supports the delivery of outstanding services. A comprehensive performance management system, underpinned by a programme of frequent audits and reliable data, is a core element of continuous improvement. Routine internal audits that evaluate quality and compliance demonstrate constant improvement. Assiduous management oversight and professional accountability at all levels enable senior leaders to know about the needs of individual children well and understand the impact of services provided for them.
46. Senior leaders actively develop partnership approaches to improving services, practice and outcomes for children and their families. For example, a shared practice framework and locally agreed processes support effective partnership working across the wider early help system. Redbridge was selected by the DfE to participate in the Family Hubs - Growing Up Well digital project. The digital solution enabled early help triage staff to connect families to the support they need, including from voluntary, community and charitable services.
47. Staff work closely with the council's anti-poverty team, which provides support with outreach sessions providing advice on benefits, housing, employment and training. Free courses are available on cooking, budgeting, life skills and debt. One-to-one support for adults is also available with trained counsellors. Additionally, families can access the Household Support Fund via a drop-in system. Commissioning arrangements are robust and are implemented with attention given to the impact and evaluation of service development.

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