

Inspection of Waltham Forest local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 8 to 12 July 2024

Lead inspector: Jo Warburton, 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	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Children in the London Borough of Waltham Forest continue to receive good-quality services delivered by knowledgeable and committed social workers. Clear strategic direction, strong partnerships and good political and corporate support have enabled leaders to strengthen the quality of social work practice since the last ILACS inspection in 2019. They have embedded relational practice and the use of language that cares into children's records. Leaders have successfully increased workforce capacity, which has reduced caseloads for most workers. Children and families benefit from social workers who spend increased time with them, building meaningful relationships and overseeing plans which are purposeful and effective. The local authority has invested in services and implemented a coherent strategy to help children at the earliest opportunity, reducing the need for more intensive support. Children in care make significant progress due to the outstandingly coordinated levels of support they receive, whether they live within the borough or further away.

Leaders mostly know the strengths and weaknesses of the services they provide to children well. They are aware of a small number of areas for improvement within the service. Leaders invite external scrutiny and have a strong strategic focus on improving the experiences and opportunities for children and families.

What needs to improve?

- The use of the pre-proceedings element of the Public Law Outline (PLO) when children experience neglect.
- The support to care leavers, including how information is shared, to help them fully understand their pathway plans and their rights and entitlements.
- The quality of supervision and the impact of audits on practice.

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

1. Children and families receive effective early help support that is tailored to their needs. Impactful family hubs, with co-located staff from partner agencies, provide children and families with a broad array of early help services. Children's needs are identified through rigorous early help assessments, with action plans that focus on effective support to improve children's lives. Team around the family meetings are used well to gather families and agencies together to review and coordinate focused support to enable plans for children to progress.
2. Children and families are consistently provided with the appropriate level of help when they are referred to the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). There is, however, some variability in the timeliness of response to contacts and referrals about children in the MASH. In most children's cases, when initial contacts are rated as requiring a swift response, decision-making is timely, avoiding delay, and is responsive to children's needs. When children require lower-level statutory support, some wait too long before relevant information is gathered to determine the level of risk and appropriate interventions. Parental consent is not fully considered, obtained or recorded, both for the contact being made and for inter-agency checks to be carried out. The oversight and impact of managers is not always as effective as it could be in the MASH to provide a record of important decision-making should children wish to view their records in later life. Leaders have responded quickly during the inspection to tackle this shortfall by strengthening management arrangements throughout the screening processes.
3. When concerns about children increase and risks escalate, social workers and managers appropriately progress to child protection strategy meetings and investigations. The co-location of health and police colleagues within the MASH is a particular strength, ensuring that multi-agency information is effectively gathered and considered. The needs of children and the risks they are exposed to are well considered, resulting in appropriate interventions to help ensure their protection. Social workers are competent and skilled when they engage with children and their families, with timely safety planning at the forefront of their work.

4. Managers give clear direction to social workers completing assessments of children's needs, including pre-birth, to help workers fully explore parents' capacity to meet children's needs. Social workers actively ensure that children's voices inform their understanding about the child's lived experience. Social workers consider family history thoroughly, as well as contributions from partner agencies. Assessments recognise children's race, culture and religion, include a comprehensive analysis of strengths and concerns, and lead to proportionate and appropriate decision-making for children.
5. There is good attendance and engagement from key partners and families at child protection conferences and core groups. Children's views are represented by those who know them well. Children who are subject to a child protection plan are seen regularly and alone by their social workers in a variety of settings. Child protection plans are thorough and holistic, written to children and actively progressed with families to bring about positive change to children's lives. Plans are clear, measure progress and are reviewed in a timely manner.
6. A small number of children experiencing neglect remain on child protection plans for a long period of time without positive change being achieved. Although additional review meetings are held for these children to explore what action can be taken to improve their circumstances, intervention for these children has not been sufficiently robust to improve their well-being. PLO pre-proceedings are not consistently used effectively, and, for a few children, the duration of pre-proceedings is too long. For these children, there is not sufficient pace and attention to the impact of interventions to ensure that their lives improve.
7. Social workers take time to build strong and caring relationships with their children, visiting them as often as is appropriate to their needs. Children confidently express how they feel to these trusted adults. Social workers write children's records to them using language that shows they care about them.
8. The impact of domestic abuse on children is well recognised and articulated clearly in assessments. Support to children and adults affected by domestic abuse is well developed, with voluntary support provision complemented by specialist support. Good use is made of specialist resources to support parents and children who misuse drugs and alcohol.
9. Children and families benefit from a highly flexible and creative edge of care service. Practitioners work closely with the emergency duty team, providing a crisis response out of hours alongside a wide range of planned interventions and activities. Edge of care plans are well coordinated, complementing wider child-in-need and child protection planning. Parents take part in a range of workshops, helping them to better understand and support their children's needs.

10. When children are reported missing from home, effective systems are in place to ensure that their circumstances when they are away from home are understood. When children do not consent to return home interviews, missing outreach workers are tenacious in seeking to engage with children and share relevant information with social workers in a timely manner.
11. Children who are vulnerable to exploitation benefit from extensive multi-agency information-sharing and planning. Regular multi-agency meetings are effective, enhancing understanding of children's and care leavers' lives and the risks that they face. Social workers contribute to the development of plans which include engagement in education or training or access to additional support services. Children benefit from trusting relationships with their workers, which is pivotal to the mitigation and diversion of risk.
12. Disabled children have detailed and current assessments of their needs. Social workers consider well the impact of a child's disability, and plans provide appropriate support, including care provided by specialist services when needed.
13. Robust systems are in place to identify children who are not in school, which link together processes for elective home education, attendance issues, children missing education and those on part-time timetables.
14. The local authority designated officer assesses referrals promptly and provides a robust response when there are allegations made against adults working with children. Recording systems are mostly comprehensive, providing a clear understanding of why decisions are made.
15. Children who live in private fostering arrangements have their needs assessed thoroughly and child-focused plans respond well to their needs.
16. Social workers carefully explore 16- and 17-year-olds' situations and circumstances when they are at risk of homelessness. The edge of care service supports children to remain at home if this is in their best interests. Social workers inform children of their choices and options, including the provision of suitable accommodation to avoid becoming homeless.

The experiences and progress of children in care: outstanding

17. Children in care make significant progress because of the exceptional level of help and support they receive. Waltham Forest is highly committed to supporting children to remain with their families or within their family and friends network when it is safe to do so. Consequently, children only come into care when it is necessary. Managers skilfully record a clear rationale for decision-making when children become looked after, which is thoughtfully written to the child, so that in later years, when reviewing their records, children will understand why such important decisions were made for them.

18. Most children live in stable and caring homes which meet their needs effectively. They receive comprehensive support from carers who understand their needs very well and provide an excellent standard of care. Children who live out of the local authority area receive the same level of support and frequency of visiting as those children who live in the borough. Wherever they live, children are supported to safely maintain relationships with people who are important to them.
19. Social workers appropriately consider and assess the viability of children in care returning to their parents. When this is safe and in children's best interests, extensive support and resources are provided to promote successful reunification, and for these arrangements to endure.
20. Children in care benefit from strong and stable relationships with their social workers. Managers promote social workers spending quality time with children to get to know them and understand their needs. Social workers are impressive and ambitious adults in children's lives. They sensitively engage with children through direct work. Children confidently express how they feel to these trusted adults. Social workers write high-quality records to children, consistently using language that shows that they care.
21. Skilled practitioners are creative in the direct work they do with children, which helps children understand their journeys into and through care. Direct work explores children's wishes and feelings well, which is evident in care planning. Children are routinely offered advocacy and the support of independent visitors they can speak with and share their views about their wishes for the future.
22. Children's care needs are explored well and inform effective care plans. Plans focus on children's wide-ranging needs and are built on tangible outcomes and ambitious aspirations for children. Any risks posed by adults are carefully balanced with children's wishes. Robust arrangements are put in place which are regularly reviewed to ensure children can spend meaningful time with people who are important to them.
23. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) regularly oversee children's living arrangements. IROs know their children well. Their established relationships with children and visits before review meetings ensure IROs appropriately understand children's wishes and feelings. Children are encouraged effectively to attend their review. Reviews are attended by partner agencies involved in the care of children and they actively contribute. IROs consistently write to children in a sensitive manner after the meeting to explain their circumstances and any plans made on their behalf.
24. Children have their physical and emotional health needs very well met. They benefit from timely annual health and dental assessments. Social workers advocate for children. They pursue and typically achieve timely access to child

and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) or specialist therapeutic services appropriate to children's needs.

25. Children are well supported to progress in education, with personal education plans which are purposeful. Plans consider how their education progress can be supplemented using additional resources, such as tutoring to prepare for exams. Children benefit from a wide range of non-academic learning opportunities, with social workers and carers actively encouraging the development of their interests and hobbies.
26. The virtual school is led by committed and skilled leaders who know their children well. As a result of their work with children in care, school attendance is improving, a high proportion of any placement moves do not require a change of school, exclusions are exceedingly rare, and suspensions are reducing. The virtual school provides high-quality advice and support to schools, which enables schools to promote the educational achievement of children effectively.
27. Children are encouraged to participate in a range of opportunities to help improve services and support. Children's achievements are recognised throughout the year, including personalised congratulations cards sent by the virtual school for educational achievements and a much-valued annual celebration event, where children receive awards for their successes.
28. Arrangements in place to track children's progress towards permanence are effective. Permanence is timely, securing stability and reducing delay for children. All children in care, regardless of their legal status, are discussed monthly at highly productive permanence planning meetings. This ensures that necessary steps are being pursued to achieve the appropriate permanence plan in a timely way, and any avoidable delays are swiftly addressed.
29. Waltham Forest is part of a regional adoption agency (Coram Ambitious for Adoption). The local authority and the regional adoption agency work collaboratively and effectively to ensure that children are carefully matched with adopter families. Children are sensitively supported with personalised stories which help them make sense of their own journey.
30. Post-adoption support plans comprehensively address what services are required to support children and their adopters. There is access to specialist support and therapeutic assistance when needed.
31. Foster carers participate in recruitment events run by the fostering service. They are offered a comprehensive training package that includes therapeutic parenting. An evidence-based programme operates successfully in the borough and provides further opportunities to support fostering households and communities.

32. Some children live with carefully matched kinship carers or special guardians who mostly have their circumstances assessed in a timely way. Special guardians are supported financially through individual means testing. They have access to a wide range of targeted support groups and training, and to specialist support and intervention if needed. The service has developed helpful information leaflets which are given to carers who are considering becoming kinship carers or special guardians for children.
33. For a small number of children who are settled and living in long-term kinship or foster care, there has not been sufficient exploration of special guardianship orders as a means of achieving long-term permanence.
34. Children living in residential care, including out of area, are provided with the level of specialist support they need to be able to feel secure and to make progress. There are a very small number of children in unregistered children's homes. There is a robust process to monitor these arrangements. Children in such placements are all seen regularly by social workers and there is effective oversight, monitoring and scrutiny by senior managers.
35. Children in care who are living with their parents have their circumstances well considered in thorough placement with parents reports. Such arrangements are subject to regular review to ensure that these arrangements are continuing to meet children's needs.
36. Assessment and planning for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are timely. These children are placed in appropriate accommodation, including foster care, and provided with both legal and emotional health support which recognises their religious and cultural needs. Social workers show a good awareness of the risks arising from the journey that unaccompanied asylum-seeking children have made and carry out sensitive and considered direct work with them.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

37. Allocated leaving care coaches are responsive to young people's individual needs and creative in how they engage with them. Young people access a range of support services via The Hub, where they have opportunities to meet peers and receive bespoke support from partner agencies, including the virtual school and the Department for Work and Pensions.
38. Some children are not linked to their leaving care coaches in a timely manner. This hinders the development of relationships at a crucial point in care leavers' lives when they are moving into adulthood. Care leavers have informed the Corporate Parenting Board that they would like to have a leaving care coach allocated earlier before they move into the leaving care service. Leaders acknowledge and are addressing this concern.

39. Leaving care coaches ensure that they regularly keep in touch with their young people, with increased visiting when necessary and by using digital communication. They recognise the significance of young people's relationships with their family, carers and friends and actively support them to maintain these important links.
40. Young people understand and have access to their full health histories. Leaving care coaches maintain a focus on the health needs of the young people and demonstrate a well-developed understanding of the early signs of any emotional and mental health difficulties. A dedicated CAMHS 18+ service provides young people with swift access to support and good use is made of external support when drug and alcohol use are impacting on young people's lives.
41. Most care leavers have detailed pathway plans which capture their views and accurately reflect their needs and any risks they may face. Most plans are co-produced with the young person, include multi-agency contributions, and are regularly reviewed. As a result of effective planning, most young people are supported to make tangible progress in many areas of their lives. There is, however, variability in plans evidencing that young people have been made aware of all their rights and entitlements.
42. Pathway plans are not consistently shared with young people, meaning that for some, the rich detail and signposting in their plan is not readily available to them. For some young people who speak English as an additional language, pathway plans are not translated for them, nor are pathway plans made available in more accessible formats when their needs require this.
43. Care leavers in custody are regularly in contact with leaving care coaches as part of their professional network. Financial support is provided while they are in custody and pathway planning helps to focus on realistic targets and achievements while in custody and planning for their release from custody.
44. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people who leave care are well supported to achieve independence along with their educational and employment aspirations, and have their cultural and religious needs identified and met. Leaving care coaches are mindful of the trauma experienced by unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people before they arrive in the United Kingdom, and carefully consider their emotional well-being, seeking appropriate support when necessary.
45. When care leavers are parents, they are supported not only to respond to the needs of their child but also to focus on their own aspirations in relation to education, employment and training.
46. Young people aged over 21 are actively consulted with to establish if they wish to receive an ongoing service of help and support. Leaving care coaches use

social media so that young people know about events and opportunities, such as paid work counting ballot papers for the general election, which many care leavers participated in. Pathway plans for these young people are up to date and completed collaboratively.

47. The leaving care service places a positive emphasis on employment, education and training. Care leavers attend The Hub to meet virtual school staff for support with their job applications and interviews. Leaving care coaches are motivated to support more young people in trying to achieve their academic and personal aspirations.
48. Care leavers live in suitable accommodation. They move into independent accommodation when they are assessed as having the necessary life skills to successfully navigate such a change. Impressively, all young people are entitled to a one-bedroomed flat in the borough, with very limited waiting times for these. Care leavers at university are supported by the 52-week accommodation offer and for young people in custody, leaving care coaches work closely with housing associations to ensure they have suitable accommodation when they are released.
49. The local offer is relevant to the needs of care leavers and has been co-produced with them. It has recently been updated to include specific groups, such as care-experienced parents. However, young people are not consistently made aware of the local offer through discussion with their leaving care coach, nor is it routinely shared with them. This means that some young people may not be aware of all their rights and entitlements.
50. Young people leave care with the appropriate documentation that they need to establish themselves independently. They are supported to access funding for help with purchasing the essential things they need in life. Young people told inspectors that they knew how to access their records and most knew how to make a complaint.
51. Care leavers are supported well to participate in a range of opportunities to help improve services and support available to them. Young people's views have led to several developments, including a dedicated information pack to help children in care who return to the borough to access their own housing.

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

52. Since the last inspection, ambitious and child-focused leaders have further developed and strengthened services for most children, families and care leavers in Waltham Forest. In the last year, political and senior leaders have displayed a commitment to developing stronger services for children through the decision to split the portfolio by separating children's and adults' services. This is intended to build further management capacity in children's services.

There is still more work to do to embed this transformation and agree the final structure of some areas in the service.

53. An ambitious chief executive and dedicated lead member place the needs of children and care leavers at the forefront of the council's plans. There has been significant investment in children's services, particularly in the development of hubs, which offer a comprehensive range of services to improve experiences and opportunities for children, families and care leavers.
54. Strategic planning across the local authority has been effective in developing support services for children and families. Partnership working is a strength, with a focus on cooperation with partner agencies, families and communities. This has been evident in the development of early help hubs, which have strengthened the provision of early help, advice and support. The accommodation offer for care leavers is impressive in terms of the availability of housing provision and the pace of allocation in line with levels of assessed need.
55. Leaders respond effectively to areas for further development, gaps in services or new challenges. They have commissioned a further evidence-based intervention in recognition of the need to further support the needs of families of primary school-aged children. This complements the long-standing support for adolescents and the work of the edge of care service.
56. Feedback from the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) and the family court about recent social work practice is largely positive. Leaders have been responsive in addressing concerns from the judiciary about the very small number of children experiencing long-term neglect.
57. The authority is an ambitious corporate parent. The Corporate Parenting Board is well attended by elected members, senior leaders and children in care. It is an effective forum in which children's voices are heard. Senior leaders and elected members take their responsibilities for corporate parenting seriously. This is demonstrated by care leavers now having protected characteristic status. While the authority and its partner agencies are committed to supporting children in care into adulthood, only a small number of care leavers benefit from apprenticeships delivered through the council.
58. Leaders understand the continued challenges they face as a children's service. They recognise the need to further develop the sufficiency and quality of suitable homes for children in care in Waltham Forest. Leaders have developed effective and robust commissioning and monitoring arrangements. A valued providers forum ensures that providers of residential and supported accommodation provision are aware of their responsibilities and regulatory requirements.

59. Leaders know their communities and are agile in responding to their needs, particularly the risks associated with serious youth violence. Leaders recognise that the family hubs provide a safe space for the community at times of crisis, for example after the recent tragic fatal stabbing of a child in the borough.
60. Senior and political leaders mostly know the strengths and weaknesses of the services provided to children well. They celebrate what they have done well and recognise that they have more to do to improve some areas of the service, including their response to children who are experiencing long-term neglect.
61. Leaders have an established quality assurance framework, but audits are not completed collaboratively with social workers, and the feedback from children and families is not consistently considered as part of the process. This hinders the opportunity for workers to learn from audits and for leaders to fully understand the impact of work on children and families. As part of their improvement journey, leaders have invited external scrutiny to strengthen the quality assurance framework.
62. Leaders are fully invested in their workforce. They have strengthened staff recruitment processes with a dedicated recruitment post. The establishment of the Social Care Academy in May 2023, the creation of an assigned children's services principal social worker post and a career progression framework support the development and retention of staff.
63. Caseloads for most social workers have reduced in line with increased workforce capacity and are manageable across most areas of the service. Leaving care coaches still have high caseloads, which leaders are currently addressing. While it is too early to see the impact of increased workforce capacity in this service, social workers speak positively about the increased opportunities they now have to engage with children.
64. Although the timeliness and frequency of supervision have improved, records do not always evidence the reflective discussions that take place between the social worker and manager. Leaders know that they have more to do to improve the impact of quality reflective supervision on work with children and care leavers.
65. Social workers say they feel valued by their managers and senior leaders. Senior leaders are highly visible, and they know the strengths and areas for development for their staff well. Social workers say they are attracted to Waltham Forest due to the embedded relational practice which leaders actively promote.

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