

Inspection of Hackney local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 1 July 2024 to 12 July 2024

Lead inspector: Margaret Burke, 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	Good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Support for vulnerable children and their families has greatly improved since the last inspection of children's services in 2019. These improvements have been made despite a particularly challenging period for the council. A criminal cyber-attack in 2020 had a huge impact on the council's ability to manage its services. The lingering post-pandemic legacy of COVID-19 disproportionately affected the borough's higher numbers of Black and global majority residents and staff. Community tensions, at international and national levels and closer to home with the unjust treatment of Child Q, as identified by the local safeguarding practice review and the Independent Office for Police Conduct, amplified a distrust of professionals for many in the community.

Professional and political leaders have responded successfully to these challenges, prioritising children's needs, increasing engagement with all Hackney communities, including the large Charedi community, strengthening strategic partnerships and significantly improving children's services.

Inspectors saw the authority's aspirations and found effective work across most of its service areas. However, there is still more to do to strengthen the consistency of

support to care leavers and to secure good-quality and stable accommodation for them at the time they need it.

What needs to improve?

- The timely allocation of accommodation for care leavers.
- The consistency of responses to care leavers.
- The delivery and oversight of return home interviews when children go missing.

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

1. The Hackney multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) delivers a highly effective partnership response to children and families who need help. Qualified social workers in the MASH, supported well by information officers, effectively screen all children's referrals and promptly process information. The emergency duty social work team responds effectively to requests for statutory services outside office working hours. Experienced managers give sound direction to workers, resulting in proportionate and timely responses to requests for support. The threshold for the progression of work in the MASH is appropriate. Risks to children are well understood. Referrers are consistently informed of the outcome of their request for support. The daily multi-agency MASH meeting provides a constructive forum to agree to how actions will be progressed. Referrals involving children with the highest risk or need are swiftly passed to the Access and Assessment teams for ongoing statutory intervention. Cases involving children who would benefit from early help are seamlessly progressed to the early help hub within the MASH, for follow action and support.
2. The impact of neglect for children is understood and is differentiated from poverty. MASH social workers recognise and understand risk to children living in homes where there is domestic abuse and conflict, substance misuse and alcohol misuse. Workers respond quickly to immediate risks. They exercise professional curiosity and consider the family's history and past incidents in context, involving the multi-agency network when required. Children and their families are quickly directed to the most suitable agency to intervene and support them.
3. Children, including disabled children, and their families receive appropriate responses when there are child protection concerns. Most child protection strategy meetings are held promptly and involve multi-agency partners. Information-sharing in these meetings is effective, informing decision-making and the multi-agency response. Meetings are recorded well. Decisions to proceed to further child protection enquiries are appropriate, with effective management oversight informing the progression of work. Children are seen and enquiries are carried out in a timely way. Parents and children's views inform decision-making. Actions identified are progressed, leading to interventions that safeguard children.

4. Leaders have continued to invest in early help provision. Effective early help services work in partnership with statutory, community and voluntary sector services, enabling children with additional needs to benefit from timely whole-family interventions that are culturally specific and sensitive to their needs. These services are making a positive difference for families, reducing risk and providing space for activities and opportunities for children and young people before needs and risk escalate or reach crisis point.
5. Most assessments of children's needs provide comprehensive information and typically lead to sensible and proportionate recommendations. Children are seen as part of this process and, for most, their wishes and feelings are captured well. Parents, including absent parents, are encouraged to contribute to assessments. Relevant partner agencies are consulted and their views included. There is a strong focus on identity, culture and ethnicity and what they mean for children and their families. A small number of assessments only focus on the presenting needs and do not go far enough in exploring wider challenges for families. Not all assessments are shared with parents in a timely way to enable them to respond and fully prepare for meetings with professionals.
6. The child protection reviewing process is broadly effective. Child protection chairs successfully maintain the focus of intervention on the needs of the child, ensuring that plans lead to actions and outcomes that are measurable and timely for the child. Effective multi-agency engagement in both child protection and child in need processes results in most children making positive progress, with risks and harm reducing. However, planning documents for some children in need do not represent the fullness of the multi-agency involvement with the family, and some child in need plans do not focus enough on the child's needs or on identifying the impact of the adult's behaviour on the child.
7. Most children are visited by their social workers and seen within expected timescales. Workers speak to children on their own, where appropriate. They use direct working tools creatively, to understand children's views and build relationships with them. Visits are well recorded and provide a clear record for the child. The progress of a small number of children has slowed when they have stepped down from child protection processes to child in need arrangements, as reducing concerns have lessened the focus of professionals on plans and visits.
8. The needs and risk for unborn children are well understood, and practice in this area is now consistently strong. Detailed assessments are sensitively written, contextualising family history and the capacity of parents to provide safe and good care. Parents are actively engaged in the assessment process and are supported throughout. A good understanding of the impact of trauma informs effective work with parents. When concerns are too high, workers take timely and decisive action to safeguard children and appropriately escalate into child protection processes and the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline.

9. Pre-proceedings processes have been strengthened. They are now used effectively to ensure timely assessments of children's needs and parents' ability to meet them. Parents are routinely offered advocacy and support to help them make the changes needed for their children to remain safely in their care. Parallel planning is evident and reduces delay. Family network meetings identify support for families and explore potential alternative carers. Senior leaders maintain regular oversight of these children. Some families are able to use the help offered to successfully exit this process. When concerns escalate or risks to children cannot be safely managed at home, considered and timely decisions are taken to escalate into proceedings.
10. Children at high risk of extra-familial harm benefit from effective interventions. Professionals work across service areas and through multi-agency panels to robustly explore risks and vulnerabilities for children. Actions are identified to help to reduce risk, harm and offending, and to increase children's safety. Children are seen within the context of their own needs as well as within their family, community and peers. Progress is evident for some children. Risks have reduced through successful interventions and the trusting relationships built with key practitioners. If risks increase, children's cases are appropriately escalated through child protection processes to coordinate the multi-agency response.
11. Return interviews are not offered or completed consistently enough when children go missing from home and care. Although missing episodes are tracked, inaccurate performance data and inconsistent case recording have made it harder for managers to fully understand risks and how responsive practice is for these children. Leaders recognised these weaknesses and escalated planned measures to improve return home interviews for children while inspectors were on site.
12. Many children are supported well through the universal young carers service offer. Leaders recognise that they need to further develop these services to better address the needs of young carers who are in receipt of statutory services.
13. Steps have been taken to improve services for children in private fostering arrangements. These services are now managed under one service area. Children in these arrangements now have timelier assessments, and most children are visited in line with regulatory requirements. However, some children would benefit from more frequent visits and better post-16 transition planning.
14. The response to youth homelessness is a strength of the service. Children aged 16 and 17 years who present as homeless have their needs assessed in a timely manner. They are routinely offered advocacy from children's rights officers. Family and friends are routinely considered to support children. Where this is not a viable option, children are offered appropriate accommodation options in

a home that best suits their needs. Children receive ongoing support to rebuild relationships with their families, even if they do not return to live with them.

15. An effective local authority designated officer (LADO) service operates with clear systems in place to ensure timely responses to allegations against professionals. Partnership working is strong, and managers are ably assisted by the LADO to carry out their responsibilities. Training is relevant and routinely provided to partners to increase surety of their safeguarding practice.
16. Senior leaders maintain comprehensive oversight of pupils receiving elective home education. If any concerns arise about children's welfare, they are dealt with quickly and effectively. The local authority works effectively with schools and community groups to identify and respond to children who are attending alternative provision or missing education.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

17. Children become looked after in a timely manner when it is in their best interests. Family members are considered and, where possible, children are supported to remain within their own family networks. Arrangements for children returning home to the care of their parents are based on thorough assessments and robust management oversight. Most children leave care in a planned way and, when required, they continue to receive support to ensure that their needs are met.
18. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in care are well supported by knowledgeable workers who seek to understand the impact of their past experiences and trauma. Most children in care live with carers who meet their cultural, ethnic and religious needs and support them to settle and make links in their communities. Some live with other young people who have a shared understanding of their experiences and who are of similar backgrounds. Children's vulnerability is recognised, and they have timely access to health and education support that meets their needs.
19. Assessments for children in care are regularly updated and comprehensively cover all areas of the child's life, authoritatively informing planning for the child. Assessments are written to the child, and most include the wishes and feelings of the child and their parents. Effective reviews ensure that the child's needs and experiences are considered, including their need for permanence.
20. Children in care enjoy established relationships with their social workers, who they see regularly both in and out of their homes. Social workers use both established and their own creative tools when working with children, helping children to understand what is happening to them, and exploring their hopes, wishes, fears and dreams. Professionals have high aspirations for children in care and they celebrate their achievements with them. Visits to children are recorded well, reflecting the insightful analysis and sensitive handling of courageous, and sometimes challenging, conversations.

21. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) maintain strong and persistent oversight of the children they support. They progress the child's plan for permanence. They build relationships with children, meet with them before their reviews and support them to attend their review meetings. Some reviews include an informal event, such as a meal out with the child, their social worker and the IRO, where this helps the child to share their views. The views of parents and carers are also sought as part of the review process. The review report is written to the child and shared with them, their carers and parents as a record of the meeting. Children's rights officers provide additional support to help ensure that the child's wishes and feelings are heard and that plans reflect their best interests.
22. Some children have very creative life-story work, which includes books, memory boxes and direct work to help them to understand their history. While life-story work is consistently evident for children with a plan for adoption, many other children in care do not have enough information to provide them with a full account of their history. Leaders recognise the need to strengthen this for all children.
23. Children who need additional safeguards through the restriction of their liberty have their plans routinely reviewed at a senior management level, to secure the minimum level of intrusion necessary to help ensure children's safety. This helps to ensure that orders progressed through the court reflect the complexity of children's needs and that decisions help to safeguard them.
24. Children in care routinely have their physical and emotional health needs assessed and met. Children who have experienced trauma or have complex needs benefit from specialist care and therapeutic support from Hackney's in-house clinical services.
25. Most children in care attend school regularly. The virtual school provides effective help and support for children and schools, ensuring that children in care receive education of a good quality. Personal education plan targets are realistic and achievable, and they help children to understand what they need to focus on and who is going to help them. When needed, children are provided with additional support, such as tuition and booster classes, to help them in their studies.
26. Children in care enjoy a wide range of interests and hobbies outside school that help them to develop self-esteem and confidence, to learn new skills and have fun. In addition to mainstream activities, such as sport and learning to play musical instruments, Hackney facilitates specific projects for children in care, which include dance and music groups.
27. Most children in care live in stable homes with carers who are meeting their needs. The majority of children live in foster homes, and permanence is carefully considered throughout their care journey. The ratification of formal decisions that children will stay long term with their carers provides children

with an additional level of belonging and security. However, some children are waiting longer than necessary to reach such important life decisions.

28. A small number of children are placed in unregistered children's homes when a suitably registered provision cannot be found for them. Senior leaders maintain oversight of these placements, and quality assurance processes are in place. Most children are visited regularly, and their unique needs are met. Senior leaders continue to work with these settings to support them to register with Ofsted as children's homes, or to find suitable alternative provision.
29. Younger children in care generally enjoy stable care, with any changes of placement being supported with clear transition plans. Some older children, aged 12 years and over, experience multiple moves, moving in emergencies with limited opportunities for planning and matching. This often results in the child moving out of area at a great distance from their school, causing further instability.
30. Adoption services in Hackney are provided through Adopt London North regional adoption agency. While adoption numbers are low, at three children in the last 12 months, timely and appropriate decisions are made to secure permanence through adoption. Practice in this area is strong, including support for parents to engage with indirect contact arrangements, 'wishing you well' visits, and writing letters to their children.
31. The quality of assessment, supervision and review of foster carers is a strength of the fostering service. The voice of the child is evident in this work. A noticeable strength is that foster carers write their logs to children like a diary of events. Initial induction and ongoing training help foster carers to understand the fostering task. Training is valued, although some carers felt that the offer does not routinely include all areas of extra-familial harm.
32. A variety of support groups is available to foster carers and their children. Hackney 'village hubs' proactively support carers and children. Foster carers value the responsive support, training and time with other carers that the hubs provide. They also provide opportunities for children to have new experiences and mix with other children who are living in foster care.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: requires improvement to be good

33. Most care leavers benefit from lasting, trusting relationships with practitioners. For these young people, contact is regular, purposeful and meaningful, and workers are better able to anticipate and respond to their needs and help them when they are in difficulty. However, contact is more basic and functional for some care leavers, who are more likely to struggle at times of crisis.
34. Transition to the leaving care team does not always work well for young people. While they are given helpful and clear information about the local offer,

and they receive a housing pathway leaflet, not all young people are well prepared for the realities of the availability of housing in Hackney and their limited independent living options.

35. A small group of enthusiastic and committed care leavers is actively involved in the children in care council, 'Hackney of Tomorrow'. Care leavers are well represented at the corporate parenting board. Hackney also employs two care-experienced ambassadors to lead on participation. These young people work to bring care leavers' voices and experiences to life. They have helped to develop the care leavers' hub, that is soon to open, and co-produce the local offer and the housing pathways, as well as highlighting issues that directly impact on them as care leavers.
36. Care leavers are well supported to stay healthy and to access routine and specialist physical and emotional health services. They have access to specialist clinical support from the Hackney in-house clinicians and specialist support and services, including those from adult services. Helpful health summaries give care leavers an overview of childhood health needs. Care leavers' records do not explicitly show whether they have received a health summary.
37. Hackney has developed a comprehensive web-based local offer that outlines the support available to care leavers up to the age of 25, both from the borough itself and a wide range of other agencies. The offer includes university support, free prescriptions, accessible gym membership and discounted travel. Council tax exemption, while available to care leavers living in Hackney, was only made available to those who live outside of the local area when inspectors commented on this during the inspection. Neither care leavers nor their workers clearly understand the rent deposit scheme, potentially undermining its usefulness for young people. The web-based local offer is not routinely translated for care leavers whose first language is not English.
38. Practitioners ensure that care leavers have their essential documents, such as passports, national insurance numbers and identity cards. This helps them to have greater autonomy in their lives as young adults.
39. Most pathway plans are co-produced with care leavers, and they set out well care leavers' entitlements, needs, what they want to achieve and how they will get there. However, these plans are not reflecting clearly enough a well-coordinated, multi-agency response to care leavers who are vulnerable and require wider professional support. While plans are regularly reviewed, they are not routinely updated to reflect significant changes in care leavers' lives. This limits their use in planning work with young people. When workers are unsure of how to help care leavers, they do not always get the timely advice and guidance they need from managers to support effective change for care leavers.
40. Most care leavers aged 18 to 21 live in suitable accommodation, including staying put with foster carers and supported accommodation commissioned by

the local authority. They are helped by foster carers and key workers to develop skills in budgeting, shopping and cooking, so they can successfully move into more independent living. Support is gradually reduced as they develop the skills they need as young adults. However, few of those care leavers aged 18 to 21 who are ready to move into independent accommodation have the option to do so.

41. A lack of housing options also has a significant negative impact for care leavers aged 21 plus. Many of these young adults, including young parents, have to live in temporary accommodation for several years before they secure permanent housing. Some care leavers have been moved out of the Hackney area and have experienced additional financial burdens, as they have lost council tax exemption and free travel in London. Some care leavers have felt vulnerable and unsafe while living in temporary accommodation, and some experience multiple moves. Leaders have plans to implement an intentionally homeless exemption, increase the number of social care tenancies and allow care leavers to join the Hackney housing register in a priority band from the age of 18. However, these arrangements are not yet in place.
42. Some care leavers in custody receive strong practical and emotional support from their workers and the collaborative multi-agency network around them. They are visited on a regular basis and are actively involved in planning for their return to the community. However, not all care leavers in custody are regularly visited, receive such effective support and advocacy from workers, or have plans for their release that are focused on their holistic needs.
43. Former unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers benefit from high-quality support. Interpreters are used widely by workers to ensure that they understand care leavers' wishes, feelings and views. Young people are supported by specialist services to help trace their families. There is a renewed focus on participation, and care leavers have attended recent events that have given them opportunities to socialise and forge new connections and friendships.
44. Care leavers who are young parents receive effective support to help them as individuals and as parents. They are helped to access activities and groups, to increase their confidence and improve their experience as parents. Some benefit from dedicated housing provision.
45. Many care leavers benefit from high levels of support to help them achieve and be successful in their education, employment and training. The virtual school provides appropriate advice and support, and many children in care enter education, training and employment post-16. Care leavers benefit from support with applications and from individualised routes into further/higher education, including access to university courses and apprenticeships.

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

46. Leaders have responded well to the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection in 2019 and at subsequent focused visits. They have not allowed progress to be slowed by local and national events. Leaders have sought to understand and address the barriers that prevent children from making their best progress. Using Hackney's Systemic, Trauma informed, and Anti Racist (STAR) model of practice, leaders have successfully created a practice culture that has been embraced by staff, managers, council leaders and many partners. Leaders have successfully developed services that are making a positive difference to children's lives. However, there remain some areas where some children and young people do not consistently receive good support.
47. During the inspection, leaders responded quickly to address gaps that inspectors found in the support and oversight in some discrete areas of practice. This involved some children who are reported as missing, some care leavers who are in custody and some more-vulnerable children with caring responsibilities.
48. The deputy mayor is Hackney's lead member for children and education services and is also the chair of the corporate parenting board. She and the chief executive officer have been in Hackney for several years. Together, they hold the service history in mind and provide effective oversight of children's services. They are highly visible and well-informed leaders who bring both challenge and support across the council, children's services and with partner agencies.
49. Children are a key focus in the mayor's priorities and the council's strategic plan. Corporate oversight and scrutiny of children's services by council members and senior leaders are evident in the work of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee. The Corporate Parenting Board is increasing in its effectiveness in supporting the council's duty as corporate parent. It is well attended by councillors, foster carers and multi-agency partners, and proactive in following up and progressing projects. Hackney of Tomorrow, the children in care council, has a strong and increasing presence at these meetings and in shaping the agenda. Its participation is shown to be strengthening with each meeting. Quarterly newsletters keep members updated on their corporate parenting responsibilities.
50. Partnership working is effective at both a strategic and operational level. A wide variety of training is on offer through the City and Hackney Safeguarding Children Partnership and is underpinned by learning from case reviews and audits. A range of partnership boards invite open conversations and challenge to ensure that services work effectively to promote children's welfare. Relationships with partner agencies have developed and matured, enabling 'tricky conversations' that make a difference to children and young people's

lives. The service's STAR model of practice is shared across the council and is championed through children's, health and education services.

51. Quality assurance processes demonstrate increased oversight and a better understanding of practice and performance since the last inspection. A comprehensive approach involves both evaluation at the level of individual children's cases and consideration of general service themes. Practice strengths and areas for improvement are considered. Learning is understood, disseminated and tracked. A positive shift in culture is evident, with quality assurance processes more firmly embedded within operational management roles. This has increased leaders' confidence in their understanding of performance strengths and areas for development. A criminal cyber-attack in 2020 had a far-reaching impact, and an enormous amount of work has been done to ensure that practitioners and leaders have oversight of their performance data. In some discrete areas, such as private fostering and return home interviews following missing from home and care episodes, challenges remain in ensuring that performance data is consistently accurate, fully understood and routinely challenged.
52. An effective clinical support offer has helped to support the workforce and strengthen practice across the service. Leaders are reviewing the offer, aiming to extend the range of clinical interventions across children's social care and early help.
53. Like many local authorities, Hackney has had challenges in recruiting enough foster carers, with an overall net loss in carer numbers in the past year. Leaders have begun to implement an ambitious new recruitment strategy and have formed a new fostering recruitment team, although it is too early to see the impact.
54. A small number of children, some of whom are subject to deprivation of liberty orders, are living in unregistered children's homes. Most children are visited by their social workers regularly, but inspectors found that quality assurance checks for some children lacked urgency. Leaders took immediate action to tighten up arrangements for the relevant children.
55. Leaders and practitioners work together to address structural racism, proactively supporting and constructively challenging broader systems and partner agencies when required. The focus is on improving circumstances for children and young people. The shared commitment to Hackney's practice model has sharpened workers' focus on anti-racist practice, and helped them better understand the needs, trauma and systems that affect children and their families.
56. Most staff report that they have easy access to training and staff development opportunities that enable them to progress in their careers. Not all agency staff are aware that training is open to them. Some professionals identify gaps in the training offer. There is no defined offer of training that is focused specifically on

the needs of care leavers and on the personal adviser role. Foster carers spoke about positive support to help them to understand the fostering task, but indicated that their training does not routinely include information about extra-familial harm.

57. Leaders are delivering practice improvements in a fast and changing environment, with many new initiatives and ways to disseminate information and learning. Not all staff are clear about recent service developments.
58. Leaders have successfully managed to reduce caseloads across the service. Practitioners now have a more manageable number of children to support and are able to visit them frequently and to follow up on their needs. Workers report that management are supportive of them. Regular supervision and management oversight are in place, although further work is required to ensure that these meetings consistently provide clear direction for staff and progress plans for children, particularly in the care leavers' service. Some personal supervision is not formally recorded, or records are not shared with workers. This limits the value and effectiveness of the process.
59. All workers spoken to reported that they enjoy working for Hackney. They spoke very highly of the model of practice and expressed strong commitment to the borough and its children.

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