

Inspection of Thurrock local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 16 to 20 September 2024

Lead inspector: Rachel Griffiths, 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	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of children in care	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding

Services for children and families in Thurrock are outstanding, reflecting the progress made by leaders since the previous inspection in 2019, when services were judged as good overall. With extremely strong political and corporate support, and in challenging financial circumstances, inspirational, innovative and child-focused senior leaders, supported by exceptional managers and staff, have been relentless in their focus on improving the lives of children in Thurrock. Senior leaders' ambition for children is shared throughout the workforce and this shines through at all levels of the organisation. Alongside strategic partners, leaders have developed a range of highly effective services that are meeting local need and making a significant and positive difference to children's lives. Exceptional early help services are successfully helping children and diverting them away from statutory services. Staff support children in need of help and protection to become safer. Children in care have a strong sense of security and belonging, and personal advisers (PAs) provide care leavers with high-quality support which enables them to feel valued and cared about.

Senior leaders know their services extremely well. They are not complacent. They fully understand their ongoing challenges, including sufficiency, education and training for care leavers, and the timeliness of initial health assessments for children in care. Well-considered actions to address these areas are already in progress.

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

1. Children and families receive highly effective help and support from responsive and creative early help services. The vast range of services and groups offered at the family hubs and from the 'think family' and the prevention and support service (PASS) workers are making a tangible difference to children's lives. Thoughtful direct work and relationship-based approaches across early help services enable children to receive the right help at the right time. This results in their lives improving. As a result, fewer children need statutory intervention, and the number of children being subject to protection plans and coming into care is reducing.
2. The multi-agency safeguarding hub provides a swift and proportionate response to contacts, with a smooth interface between early help and statutory services. Skilled social workers understand and apply thresholds consistently. Social workers obtain parental consent at the earliest opportunity or override this if necessary. Social workers gather relevant information promptly to inform a clear understanding of need. This, coupled with robust management oversight at every decision-making point, is helping to keep children safe. Experienced workers and managers who work in the out-of-hours service provide a highly effective and timely response.
3. When children are at risk of harm, prompt and well-attended strategy meetings result in effective information-sharing and decision-making. When carrying out child protection enquiries, social workers visit children promptly, exploring their views and experiences. Interim safety plans, devised and agreed with families and their wider network via family network meetings, help to keep children safe pending further enquiries or assessments. Initial child protection conferences take place promptly, and plans reflect actions to address children's identified needs to ensure timely action to protect children.
4. For children who need statutory help, including disabled children, social workers carry out timely and comprehensive assessments that provide a thorough analysis of the needs of each child in the family. Social workers are skilled at developing positive relationships with children during assessments. They use creative direct work, such as games, worksheets and activities, to help them to understand the child's world. Social workers write to children at the end of assessments to explain why they have been involved, what they found, what the plan will be moving forward and where they can get help in the future. These letters are written with skill and sensitivity, reflecting the uniqueness of each child and their strengths.
5. Social workers commence pre-birth assessments early on in a pregnancy. Again, these assessments are thorough and result in appropriate actions to safeguard and support the unborn baby and their parents.

6. Social workers regularly visit children who are subject to child-in-need and child protection plans. They spend time with them alone, do activities with them and give children the time and space to share their feelings independently from the views of adults in their lives. Social workers develop safety plans with children, which provides them with realistic and practical steps to increase their safety. If appropriate, social workers share work carried out with children with their parents, to help them to develop insight into their parenting. This is prompting positive change.
7. Regular child-in-need reviews, core groups and child protection review conferences are attended by families, their wider network and relevant professionals. These meetings provide an effective way of measuring the progress being made against each child's plan. Families receive a range of interventions to help effect positive changes for children, and social workers regularly update plans to reflect changes as they occur.
8. Social workers support children who experience neglect and domestic abuse very well. They use specialist practice tools relating to neglect to assess whether children's circumstances are improving. Many children who have experienced domestic abuse have benefited from attending the 'Help me to stay safe' group. This group has brought together children with shared experiences, enabling them to know that they are not alone, and it has helped them to create their own safety plans and build on their safety network.
9. When risks to children subject to plans do not reduce, or they escalate, the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline is initiated. Letters to parents at the start of the process provide them with clarity about what needs to change and by when, and what help and support will be provided to achieve this. Social workers give parents sufficient time to make changes within their child's time frame. This has resulted in some children being able to remain safely living at home. For those children who cannot be kept safe at home, family court proceedings follow in a timely way. The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service and the judiciary are highly positive about the quality of court work carried out by social workers in Thurrock.
10. Highly effective multi-agency systems are in place to identify children who go missing or who are at risk of exploitation. Dedicated workers in the specialist exploitation team work alongside children's social workers and provide intensive interventions with individual children. This is helping to make them safer. Specialist edge of care workers also provide children and their families with a comprehensive service that helps children to remain safe with their families and prevents entry into care.
11. Social workers carry out comprehensive assessments of children who are privately fostered. This, coupled with regular visits by their social worker, means that the children's welfare is monitored effectively.

12. Social workers carry out persistent and focused work with children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless. Although children are informed of their right to come into care, as a result of the effective help that social workers provide, many of these children are enabled to develop improved relationships with their families and their wider family support network. This significantly reduces the need to come into care.
13. Disabled children receive a highly effective service from their social workers. The quality of direct work with these vulnerable children is exceptionally strong. Social workers regularly update children's assessments and plans in accordance with children's needs.
14. Social workers and managers make timely, proportionate and culturally sensitive decisions in response to concerns about honour-based abuse. Social workers contact children quickly to understand their experiences and take appropriate action to make children safer.
15. Young carers in Thurrock benefit from being offered a comprehensive range of activities. Feedback obtained by the local authority shows how much children benefit from enjoyable activities and spending time with other children in similar circumstances to themselves.
16. Children who are missing full-time school education receive a well-coordinated response aimed at reducing harm or risk of harm and getting them back into education. For children in receipt of elective home education (EHE), the EHE team collaborates closely with children's social care when there are concerns that unmet educational needs may amount to neglect. By working effectively with other agencies, the EHE team ensures that vulnerable children receive the necessary support and intervention, including helpful signposting or direct action, using statutory powers appropriately.

The experiences and progress of children in care: outstanding

17. Children in care receive a strong service in all respects. Children enjoy a positive care experience. They are safeguarded, they make substantial progress and they achieve well against their starting points.
18. Children only come into care when it is necessary and appropriate to do so and after all other options have been fully explored. When admissions are necessary, most are planned, following high-quality assessments that identify children's strengths, vulnerabilities and needs. Social workers think very carefully when seeking the right home for a child, and children are prepared well for their move into care.
19. Achieving permanence for children at the earliest opportunity is an absolute priority in Thurrock. Social workers explore a full range of permanence options and plan concurrently until children have achieved permanence.

20. The systematic early use of family network meetings helps to identify any potential options for children to live within their family and friends network if they cannot safely remain at home. Assessments of these carers are comprehensive, as is the support provided to kinship carers. As a result, a sizeable number of children in Thurrock benefit from living in a permanent home within their wider family group via special guardianship orders.
21. For children who are unable to remain with their parents or wider family network, social workers consider alternative permanence options for them. Many children achieve permanence through long-term fostering, and this gives them a sense of belonging. Matching processes are thorough and informed by children's views. Other children live in residential children's homes when social workers assess that this is the most suitable option for them. Although a small number of these children are living at a distance from Thurrock, they are visited regularly by their social workers, their time with family members is promoted, and workers ensure that they are not disadvantaged by living at a distance from their families.
22. When adoption is the right plan for children, the child and their carer(s) are extremely well supported through their adoption journey. The quality of life-story work is exceptional. The service continues to work with a regional alliance of neighbouring authorities (Adoption East). This is both informing good practice and expediting the matching process for children with their adoptive families.
23. Children enjoy trusting and enduring relationships with their social workers, who visit them regularly and at a frequency that meets their individual needs. Social workers speak with pride about their children. They spend time alone with them, participating in enjoyable activities with them, and they carry out creative and innovative direct work with them to help them to understand their care journey and to develop aspirations for the future. Social workers have manageable caseloads, which enables them to build relationships with children.
24. Social workers develop relationships with children's families and others who are important to them. This is creatively promoting strong relationships through family time and results, where appropriate, in families having greater involvement in raising their children.
25. In consultation with children, social workers regularly update assessments of children's needs. These assessments are of a high quality, and they inform day-to-day and longer-term planning. Children participate either directly or indirectly in their reviews. Skilled and experienced independent reviewing officers (IROs) devote time to getting to know their children. They represent children's voices in well-presented and creative child-centred reports and minutes. They have clear oversight of the progress of each child, and they work collaboratively across partnerships to ensure that children's needs are met; they intervene swiftly when necessary.

26. Overall, children's physical and emotional health needs are met well, with access to both universal and specialist support whenever children require this. However, despite concerted efforts by leaders to address the timeliness of initial health assessments, the impact of this remains to be seen.
27. Children make good educational progress. They benefit from the virtual school's comprehensive, structured programme that celebrates children's achievements, including at an annual award event. Personal education plans help to safeguard children by sharing information about potential risks, such as exploitation. The virtual school monitors children's academic progress to identify and address barriers. Children are supported by well-trained carers who have access to a variety of social, educational and recreational activities tailored to their needs, which is enhancing their overall well-being and development.
28. Children who arrive in Thurrock as unaccompanied asylum seekers are swiftly found homes where they can feel safe. Planning to meet their educational, cultural, social, emotional and immigration needs begins promptly. The resources needed to support them are readily available.
29. Effective direct work carried out by social workers and specialist exploitation workers is helping to keep children safer. Children who go missing from care receive timely return home interviews. Practitioners support children to address the issues that led to them going missing.
30. Most children in Thurrock live in stable homes where their carers meet their needs to a consistently high standard. Children who spoke to the inspectors said that they have a sense of permanency and belonging in their foster homes. They also said that they get to do enjoyable and exciting things and can talk to their social workers and carers if there is anything that they are worried about. One child commented, 'I have been in foster care for the last two years and these have been the happiest two years of my life.' Foster carers feel well supported by their social workers. They feel they understand them well and are available to them. Foster carers said that they value the access they have to several support groups, as well as specialist support, which ensures that they receive the bespoke advice and guidance that they require.
31. Due to sufficiency challenges, Thurrock has a small number of children aged under 16 with complex needs living in unregistered children's homes. Leaders maintain strong internal quality assurance of these arrangements. Social workers and IROs visit these children regularly, and senior leaders are well sighted on each child. Leaders work proactively with providers to establish and register appropriate provision.
32. Participation and engagement with children in Thurrock constitute a strength. Children in care and care leavers told inspectors that they feel listened to and are proud to be making a meaningful contribution to service development, including through advocating for protected characteristic status for care leavers and contributing to social worker training.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: outstanding

33. Care leavers receive exceptionally strong help and support from the aftercare service. Increased investment in the service in the last 18 months has resulted in more staff and stronger management support, which has made a significant difference. Manageable caseloads mean that PAs can give care leavers the time, care and attention that they need to help them to transition safely through to independence, to make good progress, and to sustain improvements to their lives.
34. The allocation of PAs to children well before they turn 18 enables positive and trusting relationships to develop at an early stage. PAs are skilled and invest time in getting to know care leavers exceptionally well. PAs use a kind, flexible approach and visit care leavers at a frequency that meets their needs. PAs are ambitious for care leavers, but they are mindful of the challenges that they face and are realistic about the pace at which care leavers can achieve independence. PAs co-create meaningful pathway plans with care leavers which identify the support that care leavers need to enable them to succeed as adults.
35. Most care leavers live in accommodation that meets their needs and circumstances. They do not move on to independent accommodation until they feel emotionally and practically ready to take this next step in life.
36. PAs ensure that care leavers understand their rights and entitlements before they turn 18. Care leavers benefit from a comprehensive local offer, which they helped to develop. The local offer is clearly set out online and in a published booklet that is easy to navigate. PAs strongly advocate for care leavers to ensure that they receive the individual support that they need.
37. PAs ensure that care leavers have access to the right services at the right time to meet their physical and emotional health needs. PAs skilfully help care leavers navigate the complex world of adult support services, supporting them to get to appointments and receive the assistance that they need.
38. Due to the consistency and quality of PAs relationships with care leavers, the PA may often be the most significant person in the care leaver's life. The positive trusting relationships that care leavers have with their PAs provide them with an additional layer of safety and a sense of security. Care leavers who are particularly vulnerable, such as those at risk of exploitation, receive an effective multi-agency response.
39. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers experience proactive support to help them to achieve their goals and aspirations. Their educational, social, emotional and identity needs are well considered and supported.
40. A good number of care leavers benefit from continuing to live with their foster carers via 'staying put' arrangements. This provides them with a secure base

from where they can develop emotionally and practically, before taking their next step in life.

41. PAs actively support care leavers to maintain or re-establish links with their wider family network and previous carers where appropriate. This is helping to widen or maintain their circle of support in the long term.
42. Care leavers in custody receive regular visits from their PA. Each care leaver receives money and other items from their PA, who acts as a caring parent, for example by ensuring that they have an adequate supply of toiletries. PAs are attuned to the risk of bullying in prisons. They carefully check out the care leaver's emotional well-being and physical safety. PAs prepare care leavers effectively for release from prison. They have regular liaison with probation, looking creatively at employment opportunities on release and they spend time supporting care leavers to attend these important meetings.
43. Care leavers who are pregnant or have children receive exceptionally high levels of care and support. One PA was the birthing partner for a care leaver. This exemplifies not only the positive relationship but the fact that PAs are flexible and go above and beyond to support their care leavers.
44. While some care leavers achieve exceptionally well in education, the number of care leavers participating in education, employment and training (EET) is lower than national averages. As a result, improving the EET opportunities for care leavers is an absolute priority for senior leaders in Thurrock. EET is an essential part of care leavers' pathway plans. All care leavers who are not in education, employment or training have a realistic plan to achieve this. The local authority demonstrates real ingenuity in making the most of available funding to benefit care leavers directly. For example, teaming up with local charities and businesses has led to securing donations of items such as steel-capped boots for care leavers taking up construction apprenticeships. In addition, grant funding has been channelled into projects that provide high-quality apprenticeships, traineeships and work placements. This smart and resourceful use of funding ensures that care leavers not only receive practical support but are given real opportunities to thrive in industries that demand specific skills and equipment. However, it is too soon to see the impact of these initiatives.
45. After the age of 21, PAs actively encourage care leavers to continue their relationship with them, with ongoing support being focused on outstanding areas of need. As a result, most care leavers who reach 21 continue to receive advice and guidance up to, and sometimes beyond, 25 years of age.
46. Care leavers told inspectors that services for them have improved significantly in recent years, noting that multiple changes of workers are now 'a thing of the past'. They said that they now have relationships with PAs who they trust and who work hard for them. One care leaver said that without the support of their carer, PA and others, they would not have been able to have successfully achieved their aspiration to go to university with a scholarship.

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

47. A stable, insightful, highly motivated and extremely child-focused leadership team has been relentless in its quest to improve the lives of children in Thurrock. Senior leaders are credible, visible and highly respected by the workforce. They model ambitious standards on behalf of children. Leaders have created a work environment that enables workers to flourish and to make a discernible difference to children's lives. Leaders' vision and aspirations for children are shared throughout the workforce and this shines through at all levels of the organisation.
48. Strategic partnerships are strong. An excellent and comprehensive early help offer and a multi-agency approach to risks relating to exploitation are just two examples of multi-agency operations that are making an extremely positive and tangible difference to the safety and well-being of children in Thurrock. Leaders have robustly challenged health partners regarding delays in initial health assessments when children come into care.
49. Political and corporate leaders are ambitious corporate parents, providing effective challenge on behalf of children in care and care leavers. Children and care leavers are active and influential participants at the board, enabling members to really understand their experiences. Leaders across the council are proud of children and young people's achievements, but equally they continue to have an unrelenting ambition to improve their lives further.
50. A focus on child participation is a real strength in Thurrock. In addition to the usual ways of seeking feedback, recently developed QR codes are providing children with an additional way of sharing their views and providing feedback. The impressive 'young voices' group actively holds leaders to account and promotes service development, most recently in relation to care leaver status becoming a protected characteristic.
51. The strengths and relationship-based model of social work practice used in Thurrock is thoroughly embedded. The model has been instrumental in promoting practice that is respectful and sensitive, with children's welfare and safety at the forefront of practitioners' thinking. Across the breadth of early help and children's social care, children's unique and diverse needs are respected and considered. Practitioners across all services help children to understand and feel proud of who they are.
52. The implementation of extremely clear practice standards for practitioners and managers, and the wide range of high-quality practice guidance, aids and tools available to staff, provides practitioners and managers with a framework that consistently promotes high-quality practice with children. Practitioners and managers are confident in what they do.

53. In addition, frontline management oversight of practice and frequent supervision ensure that work is progressed effectively. Supervision is reflective and provides practitioners with a space to think creatively and innovatively. This has had a positive impact on the high quality of practice.
54. Senior leaders have a thorough understanding of the service and communities that they serve, reflected in a comprehensive and accurate self-evaluation. Leaders know their strengths and have comprehensive plans in progress to tackle current challenges, such as sufficiency, initial health assessments and the numbers of care leavers in education, employment or training.
55. Performance data and an embedded quality assurance framework, including collaborative auditing with practitioners and families, provide leaders with an effective line of sight of frontline practice. Learning from quality assurance activities is disseminated to the workforce in a range of ways, including newsletters, practice learning sessions and group supervisions. A genuine learning culture is evident.
56. The training and development offer in Thurrock is comprehensive. It equips staff to deliver their work with children and families. Practice weeks provide social workers with the chance to attend a wide range of learning events, as well as opportunities to sit on panels alongside managers making decisions so that they better understand how they can develop their professional skills. Partners and elected members attend practice weeks. This creative approach ensures that partners and influential leaders fully understand their corporate responsibility to children in Thurrock.
57. Leadership engagement with the workforce is highly effective. Senior leaders hold monthly staff and manager forums where staff ask questions and share ideas. Leaders encourage creative thinking and ways of working. An example of this led to the creation of the highly successful 'Help me to stay safe' children's group for those affected by domestic abuse.
58. Recruitment in Thurrock has not been without some challenges, with vacancy rates being higher than leaders would like. Leaders are addressing this through 'growing their own' social workers, apprenticeships, competitive pay, and development and promotion opportunities, with positive recent impact. Retention of staff in Thurrock is good and exceeds national averages. This includes the retention of agency workers, the majority of whom choose to stay in Thurrock, with some converting to permanent posts because of the positive working conditions in place.
59. Practitioners cite high levels of management support, the learning culture and manageable caseloads that enable them to carry out impactful direct work with children as reasons why they stay in Thurrock. These impressive practitioners are highly committed to children, and they are proud to work for this authority.

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