

# Inspection of Tower Hamlets local authority children's services

**Inspection dates:** 11 to 15 November 2024

**Lead inspector:** Amanda Maxwell, His Majesty's Inspector

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

Since the ILACS inspection in 2019, services for vulnerable children have further improved and children in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets consistently receive good, and in some areas exceptional, support. Effective and well-coordinated universal and targeted early help provision means that children and their families access the right help when they need it. High-quality direct work with families in the pre-proceedings phase of the Public Law Outline supports families to make positive changes, enabling children to remain safely with their families. Young people leaving care receive high-quality support and access a wealth of services that meet their needs. Children and families benefit from being supported by a committed, stable, skilled and permanent workforce. Leaders have been creative and persistent in developing a culture and environment in which social workers learn and flourish. They develop their practice and grow professionally. The embedded culture of high support and high challenge, alongside the work of the Learning Academy and practice model, is visible and evident within all levels of the organisation. An exemplary quality assurance framework is a key function within this, and the golden thread of relational practice is evident throughout.

## What needs to improve?

- Focus and in-depth understanding of the impact of family culture on a child's lived experience.
- The impact of plans when parental engagement is inconsistent and children are subject to longer periods of child protection planning.

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

1. Initial management decisions in the multi-agency safeguarding team (MAST) are timely, comprehensive and proportionate. Managers and social workers consider background history and previous episodes of involvement to arrive at fair, evidence-informed decisions. Parental consent is carefully sought and recorded before agencies are asked to share information. Safeguarding referrals are immediately addressed and allocated to the assessment and intervention (A&I) teams, who hold prompt strategy meetings.
2. Skilled and curious work in the MAST ensures that families quickly get the support they need. When lower-level needs are identified, effective triage is carried out by senior practitioners who provide clear guidance to early help workers in the MAST. Children and their families benefit from a wide range of help and support and are swiftly directed to these. Referrals for help in the community are completed with parents' agreement and followed up after six weeks to ensure the help is in place.
3. Information-sharing in the MAST, with co-located agencies, is effective and seamless. Intelligence is closely considered and evidenced clearly in well-recorded analyses and decisions. Emergency and out-of-hours responses are effective, appropriate and well managed.
4. Most children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless receive timely and appropriate advice and support from social workers and housing officers.
5. Strategy discussions in the A&I team are well attended by key partners, enabling comprehensive risk-focused discussions. Initial safety planning is rigorous.
6. Assessments are mostly timely and comprehensive. They include exploration of family histories and previous involvements by children's services. They provide analysis of vulnerabilities and a holistic understanding of strengths, needs and worries.
7. Assessments and reports for child protection conferences are thorough and timely. Social workers are successful in involving and engaging children in meetings and planning. Information from partner agencies provides a wide understanding of children's needs.

8. Safety plans are clear about the expectations and how support will be provided. Most plans are comprehensive, with clear actions to help parents meet their children's needs and understand what needs to change. A few plans lack clear written contingencies for possible actions if progress is not achieved or sustained.
9. Core groups and child in need meetings are well attended by professionals who share information, continuously informing children's risk assessments. Initial child protection conferences and reviews demonstrate a wide spectrum of informative partner contributions. Children are successfully supported to attend their meetings and have access to advocates.
10. Children are regularly seen by their social workers and sensitively spoken to. This helps others understand their lived experiences. A wide range of approaches are used to help children explore and share their views about their lives. Social workers recognise children's ethnic heritage, but relevant cultural issues are not always sufficiently explored in order to fully understand their impact for the child.
11. Risks to children arising from domestic abuse are well understood. Effective and timely work is undertaken with parents which helps many reframe their thinking and behaviours. However, there is less clarity about what is needed when families do not engage with the support and intervention offered. When there are concerns about neglect, plans are informed using neglect tools which inform decisions required for next steps.
12. Disabled children are well supported. Social workers are skilled and knowledgeable, having formed strong relationships with the children and families they support. Children access bespoke support and care that meets their needs. Children are seen regularly in line with their needs and social workers use a variety of skills to help them understand a child's lived experience, their behaviours and communication styles.
13. The edge of care work is a positive addition to the social work support available to children and their families when there is a risk of family breakdown. The service provides skilled multidisciplinary research-based interventions, using a whole-family approach which brings positive change for children and their families. This skilful direct work builds a greater understanding of children's wishes and feelings while also providing families with greater insight and strategies to support their children. This successful work and intervention prevent children coming into care unnecessarily. Edge of care work is not time-limited, recognising the complexity of the work involved, to ensure that change is sustained for families.
14. Some case supervision promotes reflective fresh thinking about interventions and direct work, providing clear guidance for social workers. The quality of case supervision records is mixed. Some records provide valuable insights. Others

are too focused on recording difficulties rather than carefully reflecting on how workers can promote change through their interventions.

15. Children who care for others receive valuable support through young carer groups. Young carers are identified by frontline workers and sensitive conversations encourage children and their parents to accept offers of support.
16. Vulnerable children, including those who go missing from home, are supported well by the exploitation team working alongside children's allocated social workers. Exploitation workers form trusting relationships with children and push and pull factors are well understood, with harm outside the home assessments regularly reviewed and updated. Services recognise that the risk of harm does not necessarily change when young people turn 18, and transitions are well managed.
17. Highly effective processes are well established for communicating with families to facilitate a smooth and informed transition into elective home education (EHE) if it is appropriate for the child. If EHE is not in the best interests of the child, the council provides persistent support to families and schools to get children back into school as quickly as possible.
18. Strategic oversight of children missing education is robust. Children's school status is meticulously tracked, ensuring that they are known and monitored. The virtual school regularly challenges schools to reconsider their use of part-time timetables for reintegrating disengaged pupils.
19. Arrangements to support and safeguard privately fostered children are effective. The response to allegations made about people in a position of trust is diligent and meticulous, providing skilled advice to professional agencies during consultations.

## **The experiences and progress of children in care: good**

20. Children enter care at the right time and when it is in their best interests. Family group conferences explore kinship care options effectively when children can no longer remain with their parents. Where possible, brothers and sisters live together in homes where they are supported to build their confidence to learn and develop new skills.
21. When children return to the care of their parents, thorough assessments are completed and updated to ensure children are protected and supported and contingencies are understood.
22. Looked-after children, including disabled children and those who are unaccompanied children, live in homes that meet their needs. Many have lived with their carers for a long time and consequently feel safe and secure with their permanent carers. Children are supported by their workers and the Lifelong Links service to maintain relationships with family members who are important to them. This work has a very positive impact on children's

understanding of their identity and sense of belonging, in turn promoting the stability of their home lives.

23. Care plans are up to date and address children's needs. Reviews of children's plans are timely and well attended by children and those who know them well. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) apply robust oversight to plans, which ensures that matters are addressed swiftly. IROs write to children after their reviews to explain and detail the key decisions which were made. They write sensitively and in a child-friendly way that helps children make sense of decisions and plans for their future. If a child is not able to remain living with their family, there is thorough exploration of options for them being cared for within their wider family network. Family group conferences are routinely held to explore these options at the earliest opportunity in a child's care journey.
24. Most children benefit from stable and trusting relationships with their social workers. Visits to children are regular and purposeful. Workers undertake some very positive and creative direct work, using a variety of tools. This enables children to express their views and understand why they are in care.
25. Children's records are up to date. Some are written to children using language that cares but this is not yet consistent for all children. Records do not always show how children are helped to understand their rights and entitlements. Children are, however, routinely offered advocates and independent visitors, which some children accept and benefit from.
26. The active Children Living in Care Council represents the views of children in strategic planning processes. This is alongside children and young people having a voice and influence in areas of service development, scrutiny and oversight.
27. When children are at risk, this is responded to well with a coordinated multidisciplinary planned approach by those in a child's network. Clear and effective strategies are being adhered to by those around children, which has a positive impact and helps keep children safe.
28. Children's health needs are regularly assessed and met. When it is identified that a child is struggling with their emotional well-being, swift provision of effective therapeutic support is put in place to help them. This service provides sensitive and insightful individual support to children and their carers. It helps them make sense of their challenges while being given the appropriate support to address their worries and anxieties.
29. Social workers are appropriately aspirational for children, recognising their successes and encouraging them to achieve their full potential. Children's educational needs are given priority. As a result, children receive excellent support. The dedicated and highly effective virtual school acts as a persistent, experienced and strong advocate for children. Consequently, children make progress and improvements in their academic performance.

30. Children are well supported by their carers and social workers to engage in activities in line with their interests and hobbies.
31. A very small number of children are living in unregistered children's homes. The providers have submitted applications to register these settings, and in some cases these providers already operate registered children's homes. These children are seen regularly by a variety of professionals and family members in these homes. However, children's records did not always detail this sufficiently to evidence that children are visited regularly enough by their social workers to provide additional assurance that their day-to-day needs were well met. Leaders addressed this during the inspection.
32. Leaders have focused on work to ensure that they achieve timely permanence planning for children. Most children are supported by their social workers to achieve permanence and stability at the earliest opportunity and when it is in their best interests. Children's views are gained and well considered within this. Children are supported to safely maintain their relationships with their family and friends through regular family time, which is arranged in a place and at a frequency which is in the child's best interests.
33. Appropriate and effective processes and systems are in place to support the recruitment, assessment and training of foster carers. Foster carers told inspectors that they receive good support. This helps carers to provide good-quality care to children which is overseen by an effective fostering panel.
34. There is a positive working relationship between the local authority and the regional adoption agency (Adopt London East). Children who have a plan for adoption have clear plans in place that usually progress in a timely way. Ongoing relationships with the child's birth family are considered by social workers who look to place children with adopters. Prospective adopters are offered an extensive training programme. Good support is provided throughout the assessment process.

### **The experiences and progress of care leavers: outstanding**

35. Care-experienced young people benefit from enduring, positive and stable relationships with their personal adviser (PA). Relationship-building starts early, and most young people continue to have the same allocated worker once they become adults. Many young people are supported with help and advice up to the age of 25. PAs are tenacious and caring in their efforts to engage young people. When young people experience difficult times in their lives, PAs are there for them. PAs are creative and persistent in how they stay in touch with their young people. They provide practical help, advice and support, which is at times what young people need most. PAs are thoughtful about young people's individual circumstances and work together with young people to address matters that are important to them, such as accommodation, immigration or education.

36. PAs enable young people to build positive networks that provide supportive opportunities and reduce isolation. Young people are encouraged and supported to maintain relationships with people who are important to them. When young people are not in contact with their birth families, attempts are made to locate family members to help young people understand their journeys. PAs communicate with extended families to support this, so that young people can develop lifelong links with family and friends.
37. Young people leaving care enjoy attending a welcoming, warm and friendly weekly group that is popular with young people and clearly shows the positive and trusting relationships young people have with staff. Young people can access a variety of specialist services and information, meet up with friends and chat with their PAs. Young people's voices have been listened to and this has influenced how the group is run. The group now includes professionals from education, the Department for Work and Pensions and emotional well-being services who provide practical help and advice. There is also support for those who speak English as an additional language. This is in addition to a variety of fun activities on offer. Young people are also encouraged to attend activities arranged by the council and within the community, such as the Wednesday child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) running group, or the Eritrean community group.
38. Young people have been involved in shaping service development, such as the exciting refurbishment of the 'Kitcat', their dedicated space, described by young people and some staff as a 'second home'. Young people are very involved with the corporate parenting board.
39. Close attention is paid to young people's physical health. They are helped to register with dentists, opticians and the GP. Substance misuse services are readily accessible. Young people's emotional health is supported through a wide range of services, for example support from a specialist LGBTQ+ organisation. Emotional well-being support is quickly accessible for young people who need short-term help. CAMHS helps to signpost young people to well-being services in the borough or brokers access to adult services.
40. The local offer is easy to understand, comprehensive and easily accessible for young people via a link on the council's website and on an app. The information is translated into a variety of languages. The offer is ambitious, for example providing council tax exemption in and out of the borough up until age 25, and priority housing.
41. Pathway plans are mostly collaboratively created with young people and well written. Real care and attention is taken to ensure that there is full consideration of a young person's situation and how to support them as they progress to adulthood.

42. Care-experienced young people who are parents are well supported to adapt to the challenges of parenting their children. Health visitors support young people, often above and beyond the standard offer.
43. Most young people are supported to live in homes where their needs are met. When young people are detained in custody, PAs keep in touch by arranging virtual or face-to-face visits and liaise with relevant professionals to support their well-being. For a very small number of young people, the level of tenacity to help them obtain suitable accommodation is not evident in records. However, PAs describe the details of what they are doing to secure more appropriate accommodation.
44. Vulnerable young people who are at risk of exploitation receive effective multi-agency advice, guidance and support as they progress to adulthood. The exploitation team provides effective consultation and direct intervention to young people through coordinated multi-agency care plans when needed. The transitions IRO provides additional oversight of this support.
45. Last year, the council agreed to make 'care-experienced' a protected characteristic, which positively influences decisions for young people. There is an advanced plan for different council departments to provide additional apprenticeship opportunities. Currently, five young people have been successful in obtaining apprenticeships.
46. The education, employment and training (EET) team works effectively and creatively to find suitable opportunities for young people that meet their needs and preferences. The council has several initiatives that support young people to pursue their hopes and aspirations, either academically or through varied employment opportunities. The borough has comparatively high numbers of young people in EET. When young people are not in education, their PAs and EET worker support them to explore all available options. Young people are engaged in a variety of opportunities, including work experience, higher education and apprenticeships of their choosing; several of these are in the council, 'the family firm'.
47. Most young people are well prepared for adulthood and benefit greatly from not having to change their allocated worker once they reach 18. Young people who have very complex needs are referred to adult services in a timely manner. For some, allocation of an adult worker happens later than desired. However, regular communication between adult and children's services supports effective planning as much as possible and leaders are addressing these delays.
48. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people are very well supported. Their detailed and clear plans state how and what support they will receive. Young people are supported to engage in education opportunities and to access appropriate healthcare services that meet their needs. Some young people access the Lifelong Links service and other services to help them locate family



members and help them obtain information about their family members' well-being.

49. The certified independent skills training programme supports young people to learn and develop their skills as they progress, while also evidencing that they are ready to be considered for a housing tenancy. Young people are assisted to obtain their identity documents, which is clearly explained in the local offer. Young people are supported sensitively to gain legal status in the UK.

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

50. Knowledgeable and committed senior and corporate leaders are well sighted on the needs of the children of Tower Hamlets. They have recognised and prioritised these needs within their strategies and through the political and financial commitments made to children's services.
51. The lead member for children is a passionate advocate for children and supports the whole-council approach that 'the needs of children and young people are prioritised in the borough'. He has a line of sight to practice via the regular oversight and performance data meetings in which officers apply robust scrutiny to matters.
52. Officers in the council know and understand their roles and responsibilities as corporate parents and this is reflected throughout the culture of the council. The corporate parenting board operates collaboratively with both partners and young people represented. It is an effective decision-making forum which influences change. Children have a seat at the leadership table, are fully involved and have a strong voice in service developments through their engagement.
53. Effective work has been completed to both strengthen and improve relationships with partners. Partners are now present and engaged in the activities and decision-making processes in the MAST. This is effective and enables swift multi-agency discussions regarding risks and vulnerabilities that inform next steps. Leaders have further developed their relationships with the family judiciary, the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), health services and their local communities to the benefit of children and families.
54. Leaders have a thorough and accurate understanding of their strengths and areas to further develop. The self-evaluation provides ambition for and clarity of what the key areas of focus are, and a clear, up-to-date improvement plan ensures leaders remain sighted on what they wish to achieve and by when. There has been significant improvement in a range of services, including the response to allegations made about people in a position of trust, the use of family group conferences and the multi-agency response to support children who are at risk of exploitation and harm outside of the home. Improvement is

regularly and thoroughly reviewed via the various boards and meetings that are held, with swift action to address areas for development.

55. Performance management and monitoring are effective and give leaders an accurate and up-to-date understanding of service effectiveness. Quality assurance and case auditing are a particular strength. They are undertaken collaboratively with practitioners, children and families, and consistently offer both constructive challenge and purposeful learning.
56. There is creative thinking at all areas and levels within the service. Senior leaders and staff look at the challenges they face and what they can do to overcome them. Staff have collectively created services and interventions to improve the experiences of children and their families. Tower Hamlets is involved in several new projects and pilots to develop service provision.
57. The council has a thorough understanding of its local communities and its workforce and service provision reflects this. There has been additional investment and focus in developing the Family Hub provision alongside partners to support families in the communities to access the right help at the right time. The local offer for care-experienced young people is available in 15 different languages. There are a variety of specific cultural community youth activities, such as female Muslim football, and different cultural groups for men and women to access. Leaders are working closely with housing to help create additional bedroom capacity in their foster carers' homes by exploring alternative housing opportunities for foster carers' adult children.
58. The council regularly seeks the views of others about the service they receive. Feedback is embraced and taken seriously when considering how best to develop and improve service provision. Children and families' feedback is regularly sought through audit activity. The 'family group of experts' have experience of social work involvement. The group has been active for a couple of years and is highly influential and involved in reviewing and shaping refreshed services across a spectrum of practice areas.
59. Learning gained from rapid reviews, local safeguarding practice reviews and peer review is well used and informs wider learning opportunities and specific education and development for practitioners across the service. Leaders ensure that this learning is shared more widely with partners to help improve and develop their collective practice and response to harm.
60. The Learning Academy has been developed and improved over recent years. The impact and reach of the academy across the workforce are extensive. The thorough framework of quality assurance underpins many aspects of practice and understanding. The process is robust and effective, and embraced by all as a positive learning opportunity which provides clarity about areas of strength and the development of practice. The council's practice framework, Better Together, is embedded throughout this activity. The 'relational approach' is

seen everywhere, and this enables social workers to safely reflect on their practice and consider what they can do to improve it.

61. Social workers benefit from having manageable workloads. Practice is promoted through the high support and high challenge approach. Workers and managers consistently describe being part of a community, and this culture of belonging has encouraged workers to remain with the council and interim workers to choose to remain permanently. Workers flourish and develop their practice in a place of innovation where everyone has a voice and contributes to the development of the service.

The Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children’s social care and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, further education and skills, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children’s services, and inspects services for children looked after, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email [enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk).

You may reuse this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence), write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: [psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk).

This report is available at <https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/>.

Interested in our work? You can subscribe to our monthly newsletter for more information and updates: <http://eepurl.com/iTrDn>.

Piccadilly Gate  
Store Street  
Manchester  
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231  
Textphone: 0161 618 8524  
E: [enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)  
W: [www.gov.uk/ofsted](http://www.gov.uk/ofsted)

© Crown copyright 2024