

# Inspection of Kingston upon Thames local authority children's services

**Inspection dates:** 2 to 6 December 2024

**Lead inspector:** Nicki Shaw, 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	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of children in care	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding

Children living in Kingston upon Thames receive outstanding services. They benefit from an aspirational director of children's services and an ambitious, stable leadership team who provide highly effective services. They are strong and committed advocates for children and young people. Leaders have made excellent progress in addressing the areas identified for improvement at previous inspections.

Political and corporate leaders are committed and engaged corporate parents who are determined to change the lives not only of children in care and care leavers, but of vulnerable children and young people more widely. This is evident in the council's financial commitment to supporting vulnerable children. This has supported leaders to maintain outstanding services for children and they have ambitious plans to further transform services to reflect the six pillars of the government's reforms.

## **What needs to improve?**

- Clarity of pre-proceedings letters for parents, so that they are clear about what needs to change so children can safely remain in their care.

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

1. Children and families benefit from highly effective early help services. Family hubs provide an extensive range of universal, specialist and targeted support that is making a difference to the lives of vulnerable children. Children are helped and supported at the earliest opportunity by skilled and confident practitioners. This is ensuring that children receive the right support at the right time and reducing the need for statutory intervention.
2. The response by the multi-agency team of professionals in the single point of access (SPA) to referrals about children who may be in need or at risk of harm is timely and effective. Social workers and staff from partner agencies understand and apply well the thresholds for different levels of intervention in response to referrals. Highly effective and skilled social workers identify children in need and are well supported by confident managers providing high-quality management oversight and timely decision-making at key points in a child's journey. This ensures that children receive appropriate and proportionate intervention to reduce risk and need. Schools value the ease of access to the SPA and the valuable safeguarding training, advice and guidance that they receive.
3. When risks to children escalate, timely child protection strategy meetings are convened, with all relevant professionals attending. This helps to ensure effective information-sharing and comprehensive analysis of risk. Actions taken to help and protect children are prompt and decisive. Children benefit from being seen promptly by social workers, who skilfully engage with them, so that their voices are heard and their lived experience is fully considered and understood.
4. Cultural heritage and identity needs are carefully considered by practitioners. Children's identity is well documented in their case records.
5. Children benefit from comprehensive, analytical and thoughtful assessments, so their needs are fully understood. Children's histories are fully considered to inform decision-making. Assessment of children's needs systematically addresses family functioning and illustrates risks, vulnerabilities and family strengths. This informs children's plans, which have clear actions and time frames, so families and professionals know what they must do to help to ensure that their children are safe and their welfare is promoted.
6. Children receive timely and responsive support while assessments are progressed, so they do not have to wait to receive the help they need. Social workers undertake safety planning at the earliest opportunity to enable children to be protected from harm. Children benefit from help and support when there are risks associated with exploitation and vulnerability factors outside the home.

Social workers complete a specialist risk assessment that helps to identify the most appropriate services to respond to risk.

7. Social workers and managers recognise and respond effectively to risks associated with domestic abuse. Children and families have access to specialist domestic abuse services that are culturally sensitive. The multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC) is effective and well attended by professionals from relevant partner agencies who support and offer services to families and children affected by domestic abuse.
8. Social workers use a neglect tool to assess the impact of neglect on children's health and well-being. The profiling tool helps practitioners to review children's circumstances and identify whether positive change has been achieved for children and, if not, what action is required to ensure that children are safer.
9. When children become subject to child protection plans, core group meetings are held regularly with parents and multi-agency professionals attending to review progress against plans. This promotes good information-sharing and connectivity between key agencies that informs the ongoing analysis of risk. This ensures that children benefit from effective decision-making and from plans that help them.
10. Family group conference and network meetings empower families to identify kinship supports and to create their own plans so that children can safely remain within their extended family if they can no longer safely remain at home.
11. Visits to children are regular and purposeful. This helps children to develop trusting and positive relationships with their social worker. This is further enhanced through practitioners undertaking highly skilled, child-centred direct work. Children and families are helped by committed and tenacious practitioners who promote a collaborative, strengths-based approach to reduce risk and need. Children's case records are exceptional; they are beautifully written in sensitive, kind and thoughtful language.
12. Social workers in the disabled children's service respond effectively to children's complex needs and vulnerabilities. Children benefit from skilled social workers undertaking direct work to ascertain their wishes and feelings. A range of child-friendly tools are used to engage children. When children are non-verbal, observations of their relationships and interactions with their family and professional network are used well to inform assessments. Children's plans are clear about their needs, what action is required to meet these needs, by whom and when. Disabled children benefit from a seamless transition to adult social care.
13. The local authority designated officer (LADO) arrangements are effective. Systems are robust and the LADO monitors and tracks the progress of referrals and agreed actions to ensure children are appropriately safeguarded. The

service provides awareness training so that professionals are assured of their responsibilities. Performance data is analysed to support continuous improvements in the service.

14. The emergency duty team, which deals with referrals about children outside office hours, is well coordinated, with social workers who apply thresholds appropriately and manage and respond to risk well. Responsive senior leaders provide prompt advice, support and decisions when needed by staff in this team. Effective and timely communications with daytime services promote effective information-sharing between the teams and so help to ensure a joined-up service for children.
15. Children aged 16 and 17 who are homeless receive timely and responsive support through the SPA. Support to homeless children is effective and is being further developed through a new initiative that is being piloted in the adolescent safeguarding team. This provides vulnerable adolescents with a timely joint housing assessment so accommodation can be secured without delay.
16. Work with children and families under the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline is effective and timely. A court progression manager robustly tracks and reviews children's progress. Parents are supported to make the changes necessary to reduce the risk of harm to their children and to do so within a time frame that meets their children's needs. Most pre-proceedings letters for parents are clear about what needs to change so children can safely remain in their parents' care. However, some lack sufficient clarity and are too long. This could be confusing for parents and create delay for children.
17. The designated family judge and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) commended the timely and proportionate use of expert assessments in court proceedings that complement social work assessments and inform decisions about children's future care arrangements. This ensures permanence plans for children progress without unnecessary delay. This means that children are the subject of family court proceedings for the minimum amount of time necessary and that important decisions about their lives, such as who they will live with, are both well informed and made as quickly as possible.
18. Strong partnership work, including with schools and alternative provisions, ensures that carefully considered provision and support meets the needs of children and young people who are at risk of missing education or who struggle to engage with their learning.
19. Oversight of the arrangements for elective home education are effective and action is taken promptly if there are any safeguarding concerns.

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

20. Since the last inspection, the local authority has maintained outstanding services for their children in care. This has led to sustained improvement to children's lives. They are ambitious for every child in care and celebrate their talents and achievements and the things that matter most to them. The dedication to children in care is exceptional. This pervades the entire local authority, from children's practitioners to senior and political leaders. Children's needs are prioritised and are central to practice. Children in care are active contributors to shaping practice in Kingston upon Thames.
21. Decisions for children to come into care are appropriate and based on a comprehensive risk assessment. Entry to care is well coordinated and carefully planned. Plans for children to remain living within their family network, when it is safe to do so, are seen as a priority and are carefully considered. This is supported by thorough and timely assessments of family members who are potential carers, and by robust support plans. This enables children to live with people they know, and often with their brothers and sisters.
22. Children's care plans are detailed. They describe children's needs and set out how these will be met. Children's physical and mental health needs are well understood and supported. Family time for children and the people who are important to them is well planned and supported. Purposeful and sensitive direct work, using a range of tools, helps children to understand the reason why they are in care.
23. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) help to ensure that the needs and well-being of children in care are prioritised. IROs provide effective oversight of children's plans and appropriate professional challenge. They have enduring relationships with children in care and advocate robustly for them.
24. Children leave care when it is in their best interests and in accordance with their plans. Reunification for children with their birth parents is consistently considered throughout their time in care. These decisions are well supported by thorough, up-to-date assessments that consider risk well, and by the involvement of the family court when needed.
25. Most children have excellent relationships with their social workers. Social workers are aspirational for children and incredibly committed to developing trusting relationships with them. Disabled children in care benefit from social workers who provide consistent and effective support and coordinate well the services provided by other agencies.
26. Children in care are supported to achieve well in education. The impressive work of the virtual school and the virtual college is reflected in the positive educational progress made by children in care. A key theme underpinning their work is to spot when support or intervention is urgent and preventative, and

they work effectively with partner agencies to ensure that support is provided as early as possible when any child is at risk of not achieving well. They are also adopting the same approach to children in need or those with a child protection plan. Schools particularly value the attachment awareness support and training that they receive to respond to children's behaviour and the positive impact it has had on attendance levels. There is a well-thought-out range of provision to meet the needs of children in care missing from, or at risk of going missing from, education.

27. There is a strong focus on personal educational plans for children in care that means they are all completed in a timely way and are of good quality.
28. Children's need for permanent homes is a priority. Permanence planning is timely, and held in mind by social workers, managers, IROs and leaders from the outset of the child's journey into and through care. Senior leader and IRO oversight of children's permanence plans is robust. There is appropriate consideration of adoption at early permanence discussions. Adoption is considered for all children who may benefit.
29. Children in care live in homes where they are thriving. Unregistered children's homes for children in care are only used in emergency situations and only when searches for suitable registered provision have been exhausted. Leaders understand the inherent risks associated with children living in these types of arrangements and have robust oversight and planning in place to mitigate these and to move children on to suitable registered homes at the earliest opportunity.
30. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive a warm welcome when they arrive in the area and go on to benefit from well-planned support. They benefit from appropriate care and accommodation, including foster care when appropriate.
31. Children in custody are exceptionally well supported by multi-agency approaches and planning that helps to meet their needs, including when they are resettling in their community.
32. Foster carers are respected and valued and have access to high-quality training and support. There are continuing positive and long-standing relationships with the Regional Adoption Agency (Adoption London South), which is providing an effective service.

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

33. Young people who have left care are supported by personal advisers and social workers who know them well and are passionate about helping them to progress and achieve their ambitions. Personal advisers and social workers are enthusiastic and genuinely care about the young people they support. Young people have established relationships with their personal advisers, the wider

team and managers. This acts as an extended family for some young people and provides them with assurance that there will be someone who knows them well to provide support when they need it. Young people are supported beyond the age of 21, and some after they are 25.

34. Young people's histories are well understood, with workers being sensitive to the impact of trauma from earlier childhood experiences. Practitioners are attuned to young people's emotional and mental health needs and support them to access support at a pace that matches their needs and wishes.
35. Young people are helped to maintain relationships with people who are important to them. They are also encouraged to develop and maintain a range of social and recreational activities, the benefit of which is further enhanced by the exceptional work of the impressive Children in Care Council.
36. Young people strongly influence the delivery and design of the service. The ambitious Children in Care Council has accomplished significant achievements, including being proactive in the development of drop-ins, workshops and activities, and ensuring that young people have good access to leisure facilities.
37. Young people are helped to understand their rights, entitlements and responsibilities. The local offer for care leavers was co-produced with young people and sets out the local authority commitment to them as young adults entering adulthood clearly and comprehensively. Young people transition from receiving support from a child in care team to the leaving care team in line with their wishes and needs, fully considering their relationship with their social worker. Young people benefit from compassionate, thoughtful and sensitive life-story work and 'end-of-work letters' that reflect the young people's journey into adulthood.
38. Most pathway plans are carefully constructed and co-produced alongside young people and are written to them. Young people's voices are clearly evident in plans that fully reflect their wishes and aspirations.
39. Young people are consistently encouraged to further their education and they are supported to attend further or higher education when this is their choice. Young people are also benefiting from having protected characteristic status accorded to being a care leaver in the borough and from good access to apprenticeship opportunities with the local authority and with local partner businesses.
40. Care leavers who were formerly unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are fully supported in their applications for asylum and in integrating into the local community. Care leavers who are parents are helped to be the best parents they can be, while supporting them to recognise their own needs. Care leavers in custody are supported well, including through being actively encouraged to keep in touch with their families and their personal advisers. Young people are

supported to understand and recognise when they are in harmful situations and are supported to keep themselves safe.

41. Most care leavers are living in secure and stable homes that meet their needs well, where they feel safe and where they can further develop their independence skills. This is enhanced by young inspectors, who inspect local supported accommodation arrangements.

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

42. Children's services are creative and innovative, and partnerships with key stakeholders are well developed, supporting continued improvements for vulnerable children. The chief executive is ambitious for children and has a good understanding of the priorities for improving the lives of the most vulnerable children. The chief executive and lead member for children are well informed about the needs of the service through regular meetings with the director and through highly effective quality assurance and performance reports.
43. Dedicated, creative, experienced and ambitious leaders and staff from the virtual school and the virtual college are, with good reason, regarded positively by young people, schools, colleges and alternative providers for the positive impact that they have on the learning and wider enrichment of the lives of children and young people in care and care leavers. The vision of the service, against which they continue to achieve well, is that every child will benefit from meaningful education, employment or training.
44. The commitment to corporate parenting is exceptionally strong in Kingston upon Thames. The comprehensive work plan that is in place is overseen by a regular and effective corporate parenting board, which is co-chaired by a young person. The voice and influence of children and young people are well embedded and making a difference for children. Young people are actively engaged in the work of the board and the dynamic Children in Care Council. There is a strong focus on what is best for children from an educational point of view and strong cross-service joint working at a range of levels, including with schools. Leaders have high aspirations and expectations for all children.
45. The local authority placement sufficiency strategy is well targeted and has been effective in helping to ensure that there are a broad range of appropriate homes for children. As a result, a large majority of the borough's children in care live in homes that are well matched to their needs and that are their permanent homes. The local authority has a strong commitment to further increase the quality and choice of placements available to meet the needs of children in its care.



46. There is a relentless focus on improving the working conditions and support to staff so that they can excel in their work with children. Leaders actively listen to feedback from the staff and address areas that need improvement. Leaders prioritise the well-being of the workforce, and this is highly valued by staff. Staff benefit from an open learning culture that enhances continuous professional development across children's services.
47. Management oversight of children's progress is exceptionally strong across the service and is complemented by high-quality supervision and group supervision sessions which practitioners really value. This helps managers know their children and understand children and young people's experiences very well. This helps practitioners to make timely and effective progress in implementing children's plans.
48. Experienced and committed leaders know the service exceptionally well. The impressive self-evaluation is a comprehensive and honest appraisal of children's services and an accurate reflection of what inspectors found during the inspection. Leaders are fully aware of the areas of the service that need strengthening and respond effectively.
49. Performance management information and quality assurance arrangements are highly effective. A comprehensive, whole-system approach to quality assurance activity is well embedded and used well to continually drive service improvement. Regular practice audits take place. These are completed collaboratively with social workers, and include feedback from families whenever possible. This is supported by an effective moderation process that is helping to improve the experiences and progress for children and to support practice improvement.
50. Thematic audits and practice learning are positively informing learning and service development. The collaborative and relational approach adopted by leaders supports the local authority in embedding its preferred practice model. A range of forums, such as a monthly Performance, Quality and Innovation Board, contribute to a system-wide understanding of practice and provide opportunities to challenge practice improvement.
51. Leaders have created an environment where staff feel valued, respected and supported. Social workers and personal advisers spoken to consistently described being well supported through effective supervision and by leaders being accessible and visible to them and interested in their work.
52. An effective workforce development plan is helping to secure an experienced, appropriately skilled and increasingly stable workforce. There has been some instability in the children in care team, which has had a heavy reliance on agency workers. Leaders are aware of this and have taken action that has mitigated the impact on children and is leading to a progressively more stable and permanent workforce.

53. Social workers have manageable caseloads. This means that they have the time necessary to get to know children and families and to intervene and provide support that makes a positive difference. The local authority preferred practice model is embedded across the service and demonstrated in leaders' and practitioners' practice. Strengths-based relational practice is well evidenced in children's records, which are written in sensitive, thoughtful and compassionate language.
54. A well-developed and comprehensive blended learning programme is available to staff, which includes bite-sized Learning Lab sessions and leadership development opportunities. Staff spoke very highly of a recent conference focused on tackling neglect, and described how the learning has informed their practice.
55. The local authority is an early adopter of the Early Career Framework for social workers. This is helping to ensure that there is rigorous and effective support for social workers early in their career. Newly qualified social workers in their assessed and supported year in employment describe being well supported and having access to a good range of development opportunities.

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