Inspection of Richmond upon Thames local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 30 June to 4 July 2025

Lead inspector: Nick Bennison, 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	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of children care leavers	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding

Children living in Richmond upon Thames receive an outstanding service. Since the last inspection in February 2022, which judged services to be good, services have further improved, and all the areas identified for improvement at that inspection have been comprehensively addressed. The impressive and stable leadership team has sustained and developed the quality of services for children and young people. It has embedded an organisational culture that puts children and young people at the centre. Children receive high-quality support in all areas, tailored to their individual needs and circumstances. Leaders know their service extremely well, and where there are areas for development, robust plans are in place to strengthen them. The local authority has delegated its statutory children's social care functions to a trust arrangement with Achieving for Children (AFC). This arrangement is well established and features effective governance between the local authority and AFC.

Political and corporate leaders take parental responsibility for children in care and care leavers seriously. They are ambitious and determined to ensure that services provided and developed in Richmond for children and young people are of the highest quality possible. There is a continuous financial commitment to supporting vulnerable children, which has supported leaders to establish a responsive and excellent service for them.

What needs to improve?[1]

- The consistency and effectiveness of practice with children at risk of harm from long-term neglect. (outcome 3, national framework)
- The effectiveness of out-of-hours child protection planning. (outcome 3, national framework)

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

1. Children and their families receive the help and support they need at the right time through various early help and statutory services. Children benefit from early intervention provided by highly skilled practitioners. Individualised direct work with children and their parents is used to creatively gather the holistic requirements of the child and their family, resulting in assessments that provide a comprehensive understanding of the child's world. Most plans include relevant, clear and time-bound actions that are regularly reviewed with the family and the professional group supporting them. Clear and well-understood arrangements for joint working with social workers ensure that when children's needs escalate, there is a seamless service response.

2. Children who need help or protection receive a timely and effective response from the Single Point of Access (SPA). Social workers in the SPA are confident and skilled in gathering and exploring sensitive information with families. This leads to thorough and detailed assessments and a clear analysis of risk and need. Social workers in the SPA understand the importance of gaining parental consent and are aware of the circumstances that allow for it to be overridden. Management oversight of the work is robust, ensuring that work is timely and that thresholds are appropriate.

3. When children are at risk of harm, the local authority swiftly convenes well-attended multi-agency meetings. The review of risk and threshold in these meetings is thorough and results in clear actions to assess and reduce risk. Child protection enquiries are detailed. They consider the voice of the child, parents, the wider family network and partner agencies. This results in social workers developing a comprehensive understanding of the risks and support surrounding the child. This supports sound decision-making about risk and next steps.

4. Most children receive an effective response from the emergency duty team. For some children who need protection outside of regular hours, strategy discussions do not take place. This results in gaps in information-sharing,

[1] The areas for improvement have been cross-referenced with the outcomes, enablers or principles in the Children's Social Care: National Framework. This statutory guidance sets out the purpose, principles for practice and expected outcomes of children's social care.

coordination of activity and the management of risk. This is mitigated by daytime services in the SPA. They promptly arrange strategy discussions and, if necessary, initiate child protection enquiries.

5. The quality of social work assessments is a strength. Social workers gain the voice of the child through creative direct work. This, combined with exploring the child's and family's histories through detailed chronologies, results in a clear understanding of the child, their identity and diversity needs, their world and the areas of strength, vulnerability and risk in the family network.

6. Children's plans are child focused, and most are prepared in partnership with their families. Advocates are used to help children understand and engage in their plan. Social workers have a strong understanding of the child's family network and proactively use this knowledge to support children and reduce the risks they face. In the event that risks at home escalate, social workers use safety and contingency plans effectively to ensure that the child, family and partner agencies are aware of the alternative arrangements to keep the child safe. Regular multi-agency meetings are carried out to ensure that children's plans are being progressed and that they are responsive to the changing needs of the child and their family.

7. Social workers get to know children well and establish positive, trusting relationships with them. Direct work with children is creative and purposeful. It gives children the chance to talk to social workers about their experiences, hopes and aspirations. Additionally, it helps social workers better understand the child's perspective of their identity and diversity needs. The frequency of visits to children is in line with their needs, and social workers use announced and unannounced visits to learn more about the child and their family.

8. Children who are experiencing domestic abuse benefit from timely actions to reduce risk. Social workers have a strong understanding of how domestic abuse affects children and adults. They create well-coordinated multi-agency plans that include specialist support for victims. These plans support the mitigation of the impact and risk of domestic abuse for most children.

9. Most children who are at risk of cumulative harm through neglect receive timely and focused interventions. These interventions, facilitated by robust multi-agency planning, lead to actions that improve children's experiences. Some children live with neglect for too long without effective interventions. For these children, the impact of neglect is not systematically tracked or analysed, which leads to drift. Senior leaders are aware of this issue and have taken action to embed a more consistent approach.

10. Most children, when risks increase or do not reduce, are appropriately involved in the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline (PLO). Children and their families are well supported within the PLO process. Children receive emotional well-being support from individual practitioners, while their parents receive a range of targeted assessments and support from mental health, substance

misuse and domestic abuse services. The wider family network is involved to support the child and, if necessary, make alternative care arrangements for them. Leaders have oversight of the risks experienced by the child and the impact of the work carried out under the PLO in reducing them. This indicates that, in most cases, the work is effective either in reducing risks to children or in enabling the local authority to make timely decisions to protect the child.

11. Disabled children and their families benefit from social workers who know them well. Their assessment and plans accurately reflect children's current situations. Children's plans succeed in balancing the need to address parenting capacity and support with the needs of children. There is management oversight of children's assessments and plans, ensuring that they are timely and respond effectively to the child's needs and vulnerabilities.

12. Children who are at risk of exploitation have social workers who are cognisant of their individual needs, including those relating to identity, experiences of systemic disadvantage and trauma. They establish trusting relationships with children and skilfully involve them in understanding and reducing risks to their well-being and safety.

13. When children experience sexual harm, they are provided with effective sexual health information and sensitive support, which helps reduce their exposure to serious health conditions. The multi-agency partnership working is a strength that creates effective opportunities to safeguard children and their peers and disrupt sources of harm. This results in actions to positively manage risks to individual children and the wider community.

14. There is robust oversight and management of allegations against adults who work with children. The needs of children are thoughtfully assessed in child protection enquiries that carefully consider the child's voice along with the help they may need as a result of their experiences. Multi-agency meetings identify and explore the risks to children. The strong tracking systems ensure that actions are progressed and that risks to children are safely managed.

15. Social workers quickly identify the needs of young carers and record them in their plans. A flexible young carer offer provides tailored support to meet each child's unique needs and circumstances.

16. Children aged 16 and 17 years who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless are provided with a prompt, child-centred response to ensure that they live in suitable accommodation. They are informed of their rights and entitlements. Effective management oversight ensures that children receive the right accommodation, if needed, which is timely and reflective of their needs.

17. The needs of children living in private fostering arrangements are well understood and met. Through purposeful visits and thorough assessments, social workers gain a detailed understanding of children's and carers' needs.

The child and the carer are well supported by regular, separate visits and, for the carer, access to regular fostering training.

18. Children who are home educated or at risk of missing education are well monitored with detailed and proactive oversight by the local authority. Strong partnership working between the local authority and schools ensures that vulnerable children receive help when they need it.

The experiences and progress of children in care: outstanding

19. Looked-after children receive outstanding support and services from skilled social workers and carers. Decisions for children to come into care are appropriate and made at the right time. This means that children's entry into care is well planned, and they swiftly move into homes that can meet their needs.

20. Social workers prioritise children's need for stability and permanence. Permanence planning is a strength. There are comprehensive, detailed plans informing what needs to happen next for children. They consider the child's cultural and ethnic needs as well as their wishes and feelings. Appropriate permanence options are considered with the child, including returning home to their parents or to family members within their wider family network when it is possible and safe to do so.

21. Children in care are living in stable and caring homes. Social workers focus on helping children live in their permanent homes as soon as they are ready. The children and carers are well supported throughout this process. When there is a risk of breakdown, social workers quickly access additional support to provide practical and emotional assistance for the child and their carers.

22. Children in care, including disabled children and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, benefit from excellent assessments that are detailed, analytical and holistic. Social work assessments contain thorough accounts of children's progress so that social, educational and identity needs are very well considered. The response to diversity and identity is a strength, with views and analysis revisited and updated as children feel able to express who they are and what is important to them. This leads to assessments that underpin strong planning for children as well as accurately reflect the changing needs of children in care.

23. Children are well supported in participating in decision-making meetings. Most children attend their child-in-care reviews, and they have consistent opportunities to access independent advocates if they are unable to attend. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) are also trusted adults for children. They visit children regularly to involve and inform them about their care plans. Care plans are co-produced, ensuring that children are included in decision-making about their lives. Plans help to promote children's wishes and feelings and enrich carers' and professionals' understanding about children's interests,

hobbies and the activities that they want to pursue. Family time is well considered, with children spending positive time with brothers and sisters and other people who are important to them. The IROs' robust oversight of children's plans is effective in preventing drift.

24. Children in care have social workers who know them exceptionally well. Social workers are tenacious in establishing and developing positive relationships with children. They take the time to understand the unique characteristics and personality of each child through regular visits, direct work and play. Children benefit from the impressive direct work carried out by social workers. They routinely use artistic and pictorial storyboards to support the child in understanding their life journey, family experiences and history. Parents and carers are routinely involved to enhance and support this work.

25. Children's physical needs are well supported by the local authority. Children have timely dentist and optician appointments. Although the initial health assessment can be delayed for some children, this does not delay children in accessing services to support their physical health. Children's emotional well-being and mental health needs are well met. Social workers quickly engage therapeutic and mental health services to provide children with timely support.

26. Children are involved in a wide range of social and leisure activities. Social workers are attuned to children's hobbies and interests. These are promoted, and the child's achievements are proudly celebrated by workers and carers.

27. Children in care are strongly supported by the local authority to access education. The local authority recognises the importance of educational stability and, through the virtual school, actively supports children in their schools while ensuring they experience as few school moves as possible. Social workers establish robust connections with both the children's school and the virtual school to promptly address any identified educational needs.

28. Children in care in Richmond are not placed in unregistered children's homes. There is strong oversight and monitoring of children's placements by senior leaders and by the commissioning team to avoid the use of these placements. This has been effective, with the last use of this placement type being in 2023.

29. Disabled children in care benefit from skilled social workers. They establish positive relationships with children through frequent visiting and by taking time to communicate and play with them. This allows social workers to understand the child, their diagnoses and complex health needs. They are well matched with both their care and educational settings. Children make great progress in their development due to the well-coordinated package of care and support provided by the local authority. There is early transition planning between adult and children's social care that ensures effective, joint support for disabled children as they approach adulthood.

30. Children in care who are unaccompanied asylum seekers receive effective and sensitive support from experienced and knowledgeable social workers. They are well matched in homes that meet their cultural, ethnic and religious needs. Social workers carry out detailed assessment work that regularly reviews the children's cultural, educational and social progress and creates plans with children to ensure these needs are being met. Children's physical and emotional health is monitored and addressed. Social workers undertake sensitive direct work with children to support them in understanding their experiences.

31. Children who go missing from care receive a timely and effective response. Social workers promptly carry out return home interviews to explore the reasons why children went missing and learn more about the potential risks. Management oversight of these interviews is effective, establishing clear actions to reduce the likelihood or duration of reoccurrence.

32. Children in care benefit from social workers who have an impressive understanding of the risks they may face when using the internet. There is careful monitoring of internet access and apps by social workers and children's carers. When age-inappropriate apps are downloaded or there is a possibility that adults are grooming children, they take decisive action.

33. Children in care, through effective planning, are placed with suitable foster carers, including, when appropriate, members of their own families. Foster care assessments are of a good quality, with clearly presented information that enables the fostering panel to make timely and informed decisions. Foster carer recruitment remains a strategic priority for the local authority to meet the diverse needs of Richmond's children in care. The local authority has implemented a comprehensive recruitment strategy, which has had a positive impact.

34. Collaborative relationships between the local authority and the regional adoption agency (Adopt London South) are well established. A coordinated approach provides sufficient time to identify and consider prospective adopters, minimising delays in securing adoptive placements for children. Children's assessments are well-developed and of good standard; they enable children to be matched with carers who meet their needs. Post-adoption support is well embedded, offering tailored advice and guidance that promotes the long-term stability and well-being of children and their adoptive families.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: outstanding

35. Care leavers in Richmond receive an exceptional service. Young people leaving care are very well supported by their personal advisers (PAs). PAs are fierce advocates for their young people and are tenacious in establishing and building long-standing, trusted relationships. When relationships temporarily break down, PAs are persistent in gaining the young person's re-engagement. PAs begin working with young people well before adulthood. This allows young

people to establish a strong relationship with their PA before they reach adulthood.

36. Care leavers receive excellent support to sustain relationships with people who are important to them. This includes birth family and social and local community groups. PAs are persuasive in ensuring that care leavers access social and recreational activities in line with their hobbies and interests. The service provides opportunities that support the establishment of a community for care leavers, through football matches, young parents' groups, day trips and a Christmas party organised by care leavers. This promotes identity and reduces social isolation.

37. The local offer is comprehensive, well understood and promoted in pathway plans. The voice and contribution of care leavers is central to the production and design of the offer. They also co-designed an app to promote the offer among young people. Advocates are used to ensure that care leavers with additional learning needs or who speak English as an additional language understand the local offer. Consequently, young people are fully aware of their rights and entitlements.

38. Care leavers are supported by their PAs to raise complaints and access advocacy. Young people's complaints are taken seriously and are actively responded to by senior leaders, leading to positive change for individual young people. Equally, complaints by individual young people have led to leaders creating significant service changes to improve service for a whole group of care leavers. The impressive Children in Care Council (CICC) is routinely consulted, and their views have directly led to service improvements.

39. Young people's physical and emotional health needs are well understood and supported by their PAs. When a young person has needed specialist support due to their physical health, PAs are quick to identify the need and work across partners to ensure that young people receive prompt support. Equally, young people can access a range of services to ensure that their emotional and mental health needs are met. The emotional needs of young people are also supported by the thoughtful and creative life-story work carried out by their PAs. This work supports the young person in understanding their history and identity.

40. Young people's pathway plans are detailed and thorough. The young people are actively involved in their plans. Their views, wishes and feelings, as well as their needs, are clearly identified. They have clear actions and timescales to be completed by partner agencies as well as the young person and their PA. These plans are well coordinated and reviewed, ensuring that actions are progressed.

41. Care leavers receive creative support to help them prepare for independence. A wealth of support is available from individual sessions to group workshops, some of which are led by young people themselves. Care leavers are equipped with practical skills, such as cooking, alongside social skills, such as growing friendship groups and establishing a community for themselves. The wide-

ranging and comprehensive support package is consistently documented and reviewed in pathway plans. This ensures that young people's independence skills are monitored and reviewed to prepare them well for adulthood.

42. Young people live in suitable and safe accommodation, which is in line with their needs and where they say they feel safe. There is a wide range of accommodation and support for young people, including training flats, which are provided by the local authority and private landlords.

43. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers receive an effective service. Pathway plans strongly reflect the cultural and identity needs of young people. PAs are proactive in ensuring that young people's therapeutic needs, as well as their independence and accommodation needs, are met.

44. Care leavers who are in custody receive a strong service from their PAs. It is used as an opportunity by PAs to engage young people in honest conversations about their identity, risky behaviour and future plans. PAs also play a valuable role in rebuilding relationships between the young person and significant individuals in their lives. When young people are released from prison, they live in suitable accommodation and are well supported through detailed and well-coordinated pathway plans.

45. Care leavers with young children receive sensitive and personal support as young parents. Their PAs ensure that they receive support from members of their family network as well as professional support. When there are concerns about care leavers as parents, parenting assessments are robust and considered. There is effective collaboration across children's services and partner agencies, which ensures that the young person is supported alongside their children.

46. The educational, employment and training aspirations for care leavers are high. Dedicated staff in the virtual school provide young people with thorough and determined guidance to help them pursue meaningful opportunities in education, training or employment. Those involved with the CICC have engaged with local businesses and have created credible opportunities for employment for young people. PAs ensure that most care leavers are either learning or in work. For the minority who are not, clear plans are in place to support them into education or work.

47. Young people are actively supported by PAs after they turn 21 years old. They are engaged in decisions about the continuation of support. Before stopping active PA involvement, PAs ensure that young people are confident in their independence skills. When this does happen, young people are regularly reminded that they can contact the duty line or their previous PA if they need further support.

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

48. There is robust support by political, corporate and senior leaders to meet vulnerable children's needs in Richmond. There is a determination by all leaders that children in Richmond receive an excellent service and reach their full potential, which leads to effective action. There are strong governance arrangements between the local authority and AFC. Regular, detailed performance and quality assurance information, along with frequent meetings with the director, keep the lead member and chief executive well informed. They understand children's services strengths and areas for development and are keen to challenge and support senior leaders in providing an outstanding service for children and young people.

49. The stable senior leadership team is highly creative and responsive to children and young people's needs. It models a relational approach that puts children at the centre of the service. The stability and consistency of the leadership team has created a sense of continuity, direction and confidence. This has established a base from which the key services for children and young people have been able to develop and flourish. They have created mature and strong relationships across the partnership. This has allowed leaders to continue to develop responsive, shared services at a time of significant partnership change.

50. The commitment to corporate parenting is very strong in Richmond. There is a strategic vision that involves an inclusive and systemic approach to engaging all parts of the council, including members, officers, children and care leavers, in the delivery of ambitious, visionary corporate parenting services to all children in Richmond's care. The work plan ensures that changes are made at pace. Children and young people are engaged in the work of the board through the CICC. They have developed and shaped innovative services for children in care and care leavers in Richmond.

51. Children and young people are significantly involved in the development of their service. The CICC has firm and established relationships with both political and strategic leaders in Richmond. Their wishes and feelings are captured, respected and used to develop policies. The work of the CICC has led to free council tax for care leavers, increased leaving care grants for young parents and increased allowances for children in foster care, as well as delivering training for young people, workers and politicians.

52. There is an unrelenting focus on meeting the sufficiency needs for children and young people in the borough. There is a vigorous commitment from political and senior leaders to developing homes for children within or close to the borough. Targeted fostering recruitment has led to an increase in the number of foster carers recruited by the local authority. The embedding of the peer-to-peer support service is leading to greater stability for children in foster homes. There is an extensive offer of support from the local authority to connected carers. This strongly supports children remaining in their family network. The

investment in two children's homes will increase in-house residential capacity in Richmond. Care leavers have an extensive choice of accommodation that supports a wide range of needs. Innovative developments have increased choices for care leavers through the private rent scheme and in the development of training flats with private landlords.

53. The senior leadership team knows the service and the community it serves very well. Its self-evaluation of the service is an accurate reflection of its strengths and areas for development. There is a continual appetite to learn and develop services, which has led to them being sustained and improved. The transformation agenda has led to the successful integration of services. This means that children with changing needs receive a seamless service without needing statutory intervention. When children's needs escalate, the professional group around the child is added to rather than changed, ensuring a consistency of service.

54. There is a comprehensive range of performance information that is shared at all levels of children's services. It is detailed and gives an accurate account of progress being made around a range of key performance indicators. There is a robust quality assurance framework. The audit process supports the improvement of practice. Social workers participate in most audits, which promotes a positive learning culture. Children's and parents' views are regularly sought to provide a deeper understanding of the quality of the service.

55. Social workers receive regular one-to-one supervision. Stronger supervision involves a reflective discussion that leads to clear, time scaled, impactful actions. In others, there is a reflective conversation, but the actions and timescales are less robust. Most group supervision involves all the professionals surrounding the child. These group conversations result in a clear understanding of the areas of progress and support for the child. This results in a detailed and well-coordinated plan of action that is regularly reviewed.

56. There is an impressive training offer for workers at all levels of the service. This supports a culture of learning across the workforce. The core training offer is a stepped approach that allows workers to train and embed learning as they gain experience. Equally, there is targeted learning to support workers and managers for specific roles. The apprenticeship scheme is well developed, allowing the service to support its own, alternatively qualified workers into social work. The assessed and supported year in employment social workers benefit from a strong framework of training and supervision that allows them to learn through training and experience.

57. The workforce strategy has supported the creation of a stable workforce in Richmond. Senior leaders are continually active in ensuring that there is the right work environment for workers to retain stability. They have continued to develop a range of offers and rewards to ensure that Richmond remains competitive in the employment market. There is a 'grow-your-own' scheme that is well embedded. There has also been the development of career pathways for

workers and managers at all levels. As a result of these and the proactive personal development planning, Richmond's workforce receives strong support for career advancement.

58. The workforce in Richmond is very positive about working for AFC. Workers feel cared for and cared about. Leaders and managers are responsive to workers' needs, and for individual staff members, they have rapidly undertaken reasonable adjustments to support them in their work. Senior managers are visible, and they consult and engage workers in ongoing changes. To ensure quality work with children and young people, workers maintain reasonable caseloads. Senior leaders systematically review the caseloads and promptly increase worker capacity in areas experiencing increased pressure.

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