

Inspection of Lambeth local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 12 to 23 January 2026

Lead inspector: Jenny-ellen Scotland, His Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children in care	Good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness	Good

Children's services in Lambeth have been significantly strengthened since the last inspection in 2022, when they were judged to require improvement. Sustained commitment and strategic focus from senior and political leaders have led to clear and measurable improvements across many aspects of children's services. Leaders are ambitious for children and have fostered a strong, family-focused, child-centred organisational culture.

Children's voices meaningfully inform leaders' decisions and have contributed to sustained improvements for children in care and care leavers, where good and outstanding practice is making a positive difference to their lives.

Practice for children in care is effective, and particularly so for care leavers. Many children in need of help and protection are also supported well, although the quality of decision-making at the front door is inconsistent.

Leaders have implemented an effective recruitment and retention programme, including international recruitment, pathways for existing staff to qualify as social workers and a social work academy supporting career progression. A more stable workforce has strengthened relationships with children and families and provided a foundation for sustained improvement.

What needs to improve?¹

- Screening and decision-making for children who present at the front door without identified safeguarding concerns. (outcome 3, national framework)
- The response to 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless, particularly those presenting at the front door. (outcome 3, national framework)
- The undertaking and quality of return home interviews for children who go missing from care. (outcome 3, national framework)

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: requires improvement to be good

1. Children and families have good access to universal early help through a locality-based children's centre model, which offers coordinated, multi-agency support focused on early childhood and parenting. When children's needs increase, they receive assessment and intervention from skilled practitioners in community early help teams. Delays in the allocation of support have reduced the effectiveness of early intervention for a small number of children. Leaders have recognised this, and over the past 6 months, they have implemented actions that have been effective in reducing waiting times and improving access to support for children and families.
2. When children may need help and protection, referrals are made to the integrated referral hub (IRH), which operates as the front door and single point of access for both targeted early help and statutory intervention. Partner agency referrals are timely and of good quality, and are generally appropriate and child focused, demonstrating a clear understanding of thresholds.
3. The quality of initial screening in the IRH is inconsistent. When there are immediate safeguarding concerns, responses are generally appropriate and effective. However, when concerns are less clear, thresholds are applied inconsistently and professional curiosity is not always evident. Consequently, some children's cases are closed without sufficient consideration of historical information or exploration of presenting issues, limiting the ability to fully understand their risks and needs and make well-informed decisions. In addition, for a small number of children, an assessment is not initiated despite screening information indicating that one is required. Once leaders were aware of these issues, they took decisive action to address them.

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.

4. When staff in the IRH identify children at risk of harm, their cases are transferred to child assessment teams, although the timeliness of transfer is variable. In some cases, children are subject to unnecessary further screening and presentation at the daily multi-agency meeting when the risks and outcomes are already clear at the point of referral, resulting in avoidable delays.
5. Once their cases have been transferred to the child assessment teams, children receive an effective response. Strong partnership working supports a coordinated safeguarding approach, with safety planning and strategy discussions used effectively to manage risk and coordinate action. Comprehensive child protection enquiries and assessments ensure children receive the right level of intervention. Social workers maintain professional curiosity as risks change, with safety plans put in place and reviewed regularly.
6. Assessments and plans are generally comprehensive and timely, taking into account emerging risks, family history, individual needs and cultural factors. Social workers engage proactively with children and families, using direct work tools to capture children's voices and involve fathers and extended family where appropriate.
7. When children require ongoing support under a child protection or child in need plan, social workers in the family and child protection teams make good use of the local authority's practice model to better understand strengths and needs within the family. Support for children and families is dynamic, with clear, actionable and timebound objectives. Plans are regularly reviewed through multi-agency meetings with the professionals involved with the children and their families. When children are at risk of significant harm, immediate action is taken to ensure appropriate interventions and safeguarding plans are in place.
8. Children and families benefit from social workers who take time to understand their needs and build positive relationships with them. Staff demonstrate warmth, pride and professional commitment in their work with children. Direct work ensures that children's voices inform assessments and plans, with activities recorded to capture both safety-related learning and relationship-building experiences. Social workers engage transparently with families, ensuring that they understand unmet needs alongside any risks and the changes required. Non-resident parents are actively encouraged to be involved in the child's plan.
9. Child protection chairs ensure that child protection plans progress effectively and lead to positive changes for children. Mid-point reviews provide additional scrutiny and quality assurance of social work practice. Social workers value these opportunities for reflection and constructive guidance, which support improved practice and better outcomes for children and families.
10. When children's levels of need and risk reduce so that they no longer need a child protection plan but can be better supported via a child in need plan, they

continue to be helped by the social workers with whom they have established positive relationships, helping to sustain improvements in their lives. Where plans are progressing well, appropriate consideration is given to stepping down to early help services, to maintain progress and provide ongoing support.

11. The needs of disabled children are well understood and reflected in regular, well-documented assessments, plans and reviews, supported by consistent visits and direct work that captures their voices well. When neglect is identified, social workers have a strong understanding of individual needs, family dynamics and parental pressures, remaining child focused and ensuring risks are mitigated. Children receiving only short breaks support do not have an allocated worker. While this may be a preference for some, it can result in families working with multiple social workers and having to repeat their histories unnecessarily.
12. Work within the pre-proceedings phase of the Public Law Outline and in proceedings is effective and timely. Most pre-proceedings letters to parents clearly set out concerns, although not all are written in straightforward, jargon-free language. Family assessments and interventions are aimed at safely preventing the need for care proceedings, with many children and families successfully supported so that proceedings are no longer necessary. Oversight and tracking of children in pre-proceedings and proceedings are strong, supporting timely decision-making. Court processes continue to improve, with Cafcass and the judiciary commending the quality, timeliness and responsiveness of practice.
13. Timely and effective assessment and planning ensure that risks to unborn children are well understood and appropriately managed. Pre-birth assessments are child focused, carefully balancing strengths, risks and vulnerabilities. However, contingency planning is not consistently considered, so that opportunities for timely permanent arrangements for some newborns may be missed.
14. Children experiencing neglect benefit from skilled practitioners who routinely use a neglect toolkit to inform comprehensive assessments and work collaboratively with parents, enabling swift and effective action.
15. Children affected by domestic abuse benefit from a strong, multi-agency response. Social workers understand the impact of domestic abuse on children, and they use research and a domestic abuse toolkit to inform their practice and plan targeted interventions with parents to reduce risk.
16. Child protection work for children affected by sexual abuse is effective, with familial sexual abuse appropriately recognised and addressed.
17. Work to tackle extra-familial harm is a strength in Lambeth. Exploitation risks are well understood, with intelligence-led, bespoke responses protecting children. Social workers build trusting relationships that develop children's and

families' skills, confidence and resilience. Comprehensive, multi-agency safety planning is developed with children, while targeted action addresses criminal behaviour. Tracking and interventions improve children's safety, reduce missing episodes and support re-engagement with education. For children facing entrenched risks, intensive and sustained work helps to prevent further exploitation.

18. Leaders are improving services for young carers, relaunching the strategy and bringing part of the service in-house to improve identification of need and support quality.
19. Partner agencies are supported to identify and refer children living in private fostering arrangements. Privately fostered children are well supported, with assessments reflecting their current needs. However, limited professional curiosity and reliance on self-reported information mean long-term needs are not fully understood or planned for.
20. The response to 16- and 17-year-olds presenting as homeless is inconsistent. Children with an allocated social worker can access emergency accommodation, but most presenting at the front door are advised to return home, including those reporting that they feel unsafe, and their needs are not fully explored. While leaders had not previously identified this issue, they have acted promptly to strengthen practice in this area.
21. Family networks are actively considered and engaged to support children from the point at which early help is first required through to the end of their care journey, including for care leavers. The flourish team, family solutions service and family group conference service provide effective tailored support to children and families. The flourish team helps parents who have lost children through care proceedings to build resilience and make positive changes. The family solutions service delivers dynamic interventions that help children remain at or safely return home, while family group conferences enable families to contribute to safety plans, and support children and parents in crisis.
22. The out-of-hours service is mostly effective, although there are some capacity vulnerabilities at certain times of operation.
23. The local authority designated officer has robust systems in place to manage concerns raised about professionals who work with children.
24. Leaders and managers maintain secure oversight of children missing education and those electively home educated, understanding their circumstances and vulnerabilities well. Education staff and social workers work together to support the most vulnerable children and take effective action to ensure their safety and promote school attendance.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

25. Children in care in Lambeth benefit from stable, consistent relationships with social workers and independent reviewing officers (IROs), enhancing the quality of support they receive and improving their daily experiences and life opportunities. Direct work helps children understand their histories and clinical input strengthens care for those with complex needs. Increased fostering provision and strong local commissioning arrangements ensure that most children live in London.
26. When children cannot safely remain at home, decisions to bring them into care are mostly timely and informed by their individual needs, enabling planned entry into care. The family solutions service works effectively with families to support children to remain at home or within their wider family and kinship networks whenever possible. Kinship care options are identified at the earliest opportunity, with kinship assessments undertaken alongside parenting assessments to minimise delay should children be unable to return to their parents' care. Once a kinship arrangement is agreed, appropriate universal, targeted and specialist support is provided to ensure stability and promote positive outcomes for children.
27. Permanence, including through family reunification and kinship arrangements, is routinely sought for all children in care. Many of the children who cannot return to their families live long term with their foster carers. While early permanence is not consistently achieved for very young children, adoption placements are otherwise timely and child centred, and family finding thoroughly reflects each child's individual needs, including their health and development. Permanence planning meetings provide effective oversight, ensuring relevant options are considered and, where required, informed by specialist assessments tailored to each child.
28. Most children in care live in stable, nurturing homes where they feel safe, happy and are able to make good progress. Most children live locally, where they are supported to maintain contact with family, friends, schools and their communities. Children are only moved out of the area when this is necessary and in their best interest, for example to reduce the risk of extra-familial harm.
29. Brothers and sisters live together whenever possible. When this is not achievable, family time is purposeful, well planned and focused on maintaining positive relationships.
30. Children's wishes and feelings are actively sought and reflected in comprehensive care plans that are written in sensitive, aspirational language and help children understand why they are looked after. IROs review plans thoroughly, considering children's histories and ensuring that additional support is identified and provided for them when required.

31. IROs build enduring relationships with children in care and provide effective oversight of their progress. They are effective advocates for children, promoting the use of independent advocacy and independent visitors, and supporting children to chair their own reviews, with personalised adaptations where needed.
32. Children are returned home safely when this is possible, and the likelihood of re-entry to care is minimised through well-informed decision-making and good support. Decisions for children to return to their birth families are made following consultation and comprehensive assessments, in line with the Placement with Parents regulations. Extended stays, including holidays abroad, are risk assessed and overseen by IROs and senior leaders.
33. Social workers build trusting, meaningful relationships with children, and visit them regularly. They use creative, child-centred approaches to engage children directly, help them understand their journeys and identify areas for support. Life-story work and other direct work are prioritised at times, appropriate to the child. This ensures that children feel heard, supported and understood, promoting their resilience, emotional well-being and positive engagement with their care. Social workers demonstrate sensitivity to past trauma, and they help children access specialist support when required, enhancing the overall quality of their care. For disabled children, workers use a range of communication methods to ensure children's voices are heard and their experiences are understood.
34. Children in care are actively supported to understand, enjoy and celebrate their culture and identity. Social workers, carers and birth families work collaboratively to ensure that children's cultural, ethnic and personal identities are prioritised, respected and reflected in their daily lives. This approach promotes a strong sense of belonging, self-esteem and pride, helping children develop a positive sense of who they are and strengthening their emotional wellbeing.
35. When children go missing from care, return home interviews (RHIs) are not consistently recorded, and attempts to carry them out lack rigour. Consequently, RHIs are not used effectively to identify potential harm, inform future planning or guide risk assessment. Conflation between missing-from-care episodes and unauthorised absences weakens the response for some children.
36. Social workers have a clear understanding of the risks of extra-familial harm and the heightened levels of risk that children in care can face, including some of those who live in children's homes. Risk assessments are routinely completed and are comprehensive; practitioners consider all relevant factors to promote children's safety and wellbeing.
37. The health needs of children in care, including those who are disabled and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, are well considered and prioritised by social workers and healthcare professionals. Plans reflect the often-complex

health and emotional needs of children, supporting their access to specialist services to promote their wellbeing. When waiting times limit direct provision, the in-house support team provides immediate help, ensuring children's health needs are addressed without delay.

38. Social workers are ambitious for the children they support, encouraging high aspirations, which are reflected in children's records. Continuity of education is prioritised during placement changes, helping children to remain at the same school whenever possible and supporting them to make good educational progress.
39. Children in care have many opportunities to develop interests, explore hobbies and build friendships. Social workers take pride in children's achievements, ensuring their successes are recognised and celebrated. For disabled children, social workers are ambitious and challenge perceptions to ensure that each child can reach their full potential.
40. Social workers provide highly effective, child-centred support to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, ensuring their voices guide decisions. Direct work, stable placements and thorough planning address children's health, education, independence and legal needs, while children engage in positive community activities and safely maintain family contact.
41. Disabled children benefit from the 0 to 25 service, which provides continuity of support beyond the age of 18 and ensures smooth transitions to adult services.
42. An effective sufficiency strategy and commissioning arrangements have helped to ensure that no children in Lambeth are currently living in unregistered children's homes, and none have done so in the past 6 months.
43. Staff in the virtual school work closely with schools, social workers, carers and other professionals to ensure that children in care receive appropriate education tailored to their individual needs. Support is adapted as children's circumstances change, helping them make good progress from their starting points. Most children attend school regularly, including unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, who settle quickly and develop their English skills.
44. The fostering service has seen many improvements in the last year. Senior managers have robustly audited the service and taken decisive action to improve practice where needed. Foster carers now benefit from a comprehensive training programme and consistent support from a more settled fostering team. The diverse membership of the fostering panel helps to ensure that it meets the needs of the service. Consequently, recruitment of foster carers continues to flourish, with Lambeth significantly exceeding national trends in recruitment and retention.
45. Adoption services in Lambeth are offered through the regional adoption agency (Adopt London South). Prospective adopters are well supported by their social workers, who provide consistent support throughout the assessment and family

finding process. A comprehensive adoption support offer ensures that children, adoptive families and birth parents are supported throughout their adoption journey. While joint working between the regional adoption agency and children's social workers is strong, leaders recognise that there is more to do in partnership with the agency to recruit more adopters.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: outstanding

46. Care leavers in Lambeth benefit from an outstanding service, receiving exceptional support from personal advisers (PAs). The council's recognition of care experience as a protected characteristic is embedded in strategic and operational decision-making and made real in the help and support that services provide for young people. As a result, care leavers are supported into independence with good access to suitable, permanent housing. Vulnerable groups, including those in custody, former asylum-seeking children and young parents, receive tailored support that promotes stability, resilience and positive life outcomes.
47. The strong, supportive relationships that PAs develop with care leavers make a big difference to their lives. PAs are flexible and responsive in visiting young people in a variety of safe and accessible settings. PAs demonstrate a high level of commitment, celebrating care leavers' achievements and supporting them at key life events, particularly when family networks are limited. These relationships provide both emotional and practical support and positively impact care leavers' sense of belonging, confidence and self-worth. Care leavers consistently report that these relationships are central to their progress.
48. Care leavers in Lambeth have an active, influential and respected voice, playing a central role in shaping services, including the development of the newly created care leavers hub and the local offer. Insight from the Bright Spots survey, young inspector activity and ongoing direct engagement with care leavers are used effectively to inform service improvements. Political and corporate leaders have gone out of their way to get to know individual care leavers and understand their needs, which has included giving them a priority voice in the corporate parenting board meetings and supporting them to lead on choices on the design of the hub. This embedded culture of engagement and co-production ensures that services are relevant and responsive to care leavers' needs and experiences. Participation workers complement the role of PAs, helping care leavers feel listened to, celebrated and empowered. They are highly valued by young people, particularly when their PAs are unavailable.
49. Pathway plans are carefully developed through thoughtful and meaningful conversations with care leavers about their hopes, aspirations, vulnerabilities and future plans. This personalised and emotionally attuned approach ensures the plans are practical and effective and strengthen care leavers' trust in Lambeth's services.

50. Care leavers in Lambeth benefit from a flexible, responsive service that supports them for as long as they need, sometimes beyond the age of 25. The local authority maintains contact to ensure care leavers are aware of their entitlements.
51. Care leavers understand the support they are entitled to. The local offer is detailed, comprehensive and fully accessible online in multiple languages. It gives a solid foundation for young people who are transitioning to independent living, with PAs able to request discretionary payments to provide tailored support and enhance independence. Senior leaders are working to ensure that all PAs are aware of these discretionary elements and that the offer and entitlements are consistently accessible for care leavers living outside London.
52. A key strength in Lambeth is the quality and range of housing available to care leavers, providing stability and consistency for young people. PAs effectively support and advocate for care leavers to access suitable housing; they challenge unacceptable conditions, ensuring that young people feel safe and secure. This provision of stable housing underpins care leavers' ability to engage with education, employment and wider opportunities, supporting positive transitions to independent adult life.
53. Overall, care leavers are supported well to engage in education, employment and training (EET). Senior leaders are taking further action to improve EET outcomes across the care leaver population. Many care leavers in Lambeth are pursuing higher education, vocational training or employment. In response to feedback about the pressures of combining work and study, the council has revised its apprenticeship offer to provide care leavers with bespoke employment opportunities.
54. Care leavers receive proactive support for their physical and mental health, with PAs arranging specialist assessments, advocating for treatments and helping young people to manage their conditions and live independently. Care leavers have access to a wide range of mental health services, including community mental health teams and the Lambeth emotional wellbeing service, ensuring timely therapeutic support for those who need it.
55. Care leavers who were unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are well supported to resolve their immigration or asylum status. They receive sensitive, consistent and well-informed support in Lambeth, a borough of sanctuary. PAs develop strong, stable relationships with care leavers, who feel listened to, understood and supported. Pathway plans are co-produced, trauma informed and responsive to care leavers' cultural, identity and emotional needs, reflecting the authority's commitment to culturally sensitive practice.
56. Care leavers in custody receive purposeful, consistent support from their PAs, who maintain regular contact and work with other agencies to ensure their needs are met. PAs persistently support these young people's engagement in education, employment and incentive schemes, and facilitate their access to

emotional wellbeing and substance misuse services. They adopt a whole-family approach to help young people maintain important relationships and ensure timely, well-coordinated planning for their reintegration into the community.

57. Care leavers who are parents receive intensive, compassionate support from PAs, who work closely with partner agencies to strengthen these young people's parenting skills and emotional wellbeing, and to promote their children's safety. This hands-on, well-coordinated approach ensures that care leavers are better equipped to care for their children, promotes positive family outcomes and reduces the risk of harm, supporting both the parents' and children's long-term stability and wellbeing.

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

57. Senior leaders in Lambeth provide effective and ambitious leadership that has resulted in sustained and significant improvement across children's services. Since the last inspection, leaders have worked with pace, determination and focus to address areas identified for improvement. Political and corporate commitment to children and young people is strong, with continued investment in services despite financial pressures on the council.
58. Stable and visible leadership has been fundamental to the improvement achieved since the last inspection. Political and corporate leaders, and senior managers in children's services, have maintained a consistent focus on quality, supported by effective governance and targeted investment. Senior leaders prioritise the needs of children, and they have a strong understanding of local challenges, risks and community strengths. Engagement with external specialists reinforces the council's commitment to its 2030 priorities to make Lambeth a safe place for everyone and to become a recognised child-friendly borough.
59. Political leaders are highly supportive of the children's agenda. Despite the financial pressures the council faces, investment in strengthening services to improve outcomes for children, families and care leavers is a continuing commitment.
60. Senior leaders have an accurate understanding of service performance, and the self-evaluation is comprehensive and honest, and largely aligns with inspection findings. However, inspectors identified weaknesses at the front door, including the premature closure of contacts and the response to 16- and 17-year-olds presenting as homeless, which were previously unknown to leaders. Once identified, leaders responded promptly with decisive actions to address these issues.
61. Senior leaders are largely aware of areas requiring further development. Their philosophy is aligned with the Families First Partnership reforms, and current services are helping to build the foundations for changes that will be

implemented as a result of these reforms. Leaders respond effectively to evolving service demands, with a positive impact on the quality of practice with children and young people.

62. The response to serious youth crime and extra-familial harm is particularly strong, with services and professionals who are innovative, reflective and adaptable in addressing evolving risks and presenting issues in the community.
63. Lambeth's commitment to corporate parenting is strong. The Corporate Parenting Board, chaired by the lead member for children, effectively oversees an ambitious strategy, ensuring that children and care leavers' voices shape the borough's priorities. The child-focused ethos is aptly described by the director of children's services as 'more parent and less corporate'.
64. Participation is a significant strength, with children and care leavers actively shaping both strategy and practice. Their voices inform the co-produced care leavers' offer and influence care reviews and pathway planning. This reflects leaders' respect for children and young people, recognising that they are the experts in what they need to grow successfully into adulthood.
65. The council is committed to continuous improvement and fostering a strong learning culture. The establishment of the social work academy, which supports both social workers and alternatively qualified practitioners, has helped embed Lambeth's practice model and lays the foundation for current developments in anti-racist practice.
66. A well-developed performance and audit framework enables leaders to identify trends, strengths and areas for improvement. While data is comprehensive and accessible, leaders recognise that it does not alone provide the detailed insight needed to fully understand children's experiences and progress. Regular dip-sampling and audit activity help provide a fuller picture, and the right balance of compliance and quality. Audit and review processes, supported by moderation and external scrutiny, promote reflection, learning and accountability, and findings are used to inform training and service development.
67. Practitioners report high job satisfaction, and they value the positive, reflective and learning-focused culture that is fostered by senior leaders. Generally effective management oversight and supportive supervision reinforce the practice model, ensuring that most children and families receive high-quality, reflective and consistent support.
68. Lambeth's rich multicultural community is reflected in the workforce. Leaders promote an inclusive culture in which staff feel valued, respected and confident to celebrate their identity. A strong zero tolerance stance on racism and discrimination creates a work environment where staff feel safe to be able to remain professionally curious about areas of difference in their work.

69. Lambeth leaders have successfully strengthened and stabilised the workforce since the last inspection, with most frontline posts now filled by permanent staff and long-serving agency workers. This has created a stable, skilled and motivated workforce, supported by a vibrant culture of consideration, genuine care and high aspiration for children. Workforce initiatives, recognition schemes and support for alternatively qualified workers ensure that children and families receive support from knowledgeable, consistent and responsive professionals.

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