

London Borough of Waltham Forest

Inspection of children's social care services

Inspection dates: 28 January 2019 to 8 February 2019

Lead inspector: Andy Whippey
Her 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 and care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Services for children in Waltham Forest are good and have significantly improved since the last inspection in 2015. Leaders have made strong progress to establish a resilient, sustainable and child-focused service. This is underpinned by strong, effective political and corporate support. They share with partner agencies a clear, ambitious vision and core values. Leaders know their services and areas for development and use this knowledge to improve the quality of practice and outcomes.

Children, young people and their families receive the right level of services when they need them. Multi-agency working is well developed and contributes to achieving good outcomes for children. Thresholds are well understood, and assessments are mostly appropriately analytical. However, the quality of children's plans are variable, and they do not consistently articulate how the needs of children will be met.

Children in care receive a good service from workers, who know them well. Children and young people are consistently encouraged to be involved in decision-

making about their lives, and their views have a direct impact on service delivery and development. Care leavers are increasingly well supported and most achieve good outcomes.

What needs to improve

- The quality of children's plans to ensure that they are child-specific and identify timescales for change.
- The timeliness of children in care health assessments being entered onto children's records.
- The purpose of visits to children and the recording of such visits in a timely manner.
- The link between planning for children at risk of domestic abuse at Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARAC) and their child protection/ children in need plans.
- Care leavers' access to their health history and the comprehensiveness of pathway plans.

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

1. Children and families benefit from an embedded and well-developed early help offer. Strategic partners have fully embraced the wholesale restructure of early help services that took place in 2016. The 'Our Family Journey' assessment tool is used well with children and families to identify concerns and needs. These are consolidated into clear and realistic action plans that families understand. Packages of support, including those involving adult services, are well coordinated and regularly reviewed. Early help managers know their services well and are making good use of the performance dashboard to monitor progress, evaluate the effectiveness of services and drive continuous improvements. Families spoken to by inspectors talked positively of the value of the help and support provided to improve outcomes for their children.
2. Partners have a good understanding of thresholds when making referrals. These are consistently applied for children in need of help and protection. Decisions are timely, with good evidence of management oversight. The Waltham Forest multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) provides a timely and effective response to referrals by professionals and members of the public, to help to ensure that children's needs are met at the earliest opportunity. Partnership working is strong, ensuring timely information-sharing to support good decision-making that is consistent with children's level of need.
3. Children and young people receive appropriate support and intervention from an effective out-of-hours emergency duty team service. Information-sharing with day-time colleagues ensures clear communication of children and families' circumstances and a timely response to referrals. The daily risk management meeting ensures the appropriate sharing of information between partner agencies in the MASH. This helps to identify changing risks to children and young people. For example, changes are made to the red, amber, green risk rating following police referrals of domestic abuse, resulting in a review of the agency interventions required.
4. Social workers recognise and respond when concerns for children escalate. Within strategy discussions, partner agency information is well considered, and historical factors are appropriately considered. The rationale for decision-making to minimise risk is clear, although, in a minority of discussions, there is inconsistent recording of timescales for the completion of actions. Strategy meetings are held consistently when children and young people are missing or at risk of exploitation. When children in need, including those in need of protection, are identified as

being at increased need or risk, they are appropriately stepped up for higher levels of statutory intervention.

5. Timely child protection enquiries demonstrate proportionate actions and appropriate decision-making to ensure that risks and needs are understood and responded to effectively. Children are routinely seen alone to gather their wishes and feelings and gain an understanding of their lived experiences, as well as those of their brothers and sisters. Managers have clear oversight of assessments, but in some cases these are insufficiently analytical about the next steps required in order to meet children's needs in a timely manner.
6. Child protection plans and records of core group minutes evidence an appropriate focus on children's needs. Core groups are routinely held with good partner agency input. However, the actions noted in records of core groups are not always clear enough to ensure that parents have sufficient understanding of the changes required. Information gathered at these meetings is not consistently used to make changes to children's plans, and a minority of children in need plans are not specific enough to address the individual needs of children. Child protection case conferences are effective, with positive engagement of partner agencies and a clear focus on the needs of children leading to appropriate and proportionate decision-making. Family group conferences are increasingly and appropriately used to help and engage the early identification of extended family and friends as part of safety planning for children.
7. Social workers know their children well. They visit children regularly and see them alone. Increasing use is made of purposeful individual work to help understand their experiences. In a minority of cases, visits are not always purposeful and linked to goals in children's plans. In some cases, records are not completed in a timely manner, which results in gaps in information on children's records.
8. Children assessed to be at risk from domestic abuse receive effective interventions to safeguard their welfare. There is a range of strong and flexible services provided for children and adults. Social workers appropriately assess the risks associated with domestic abuse and honour-based violence. This information is well analysed, and results in sustained interventions. The local authority recognises that there is more to do in ensuring the actions agreed at MARAC meetings are implemented in planning for children.
9. A well-coordinated response ensures that most children missing education are found promptly. The children missing education team undertakes all relevant checks and works closely with police, schools, other local authorities and agencies, and is persistent in its efforts to identify children missing education to help keep them safe.

10. Staff work diligently to ensure that children who are educated at home are appropriately safeguarded. The elective home education officer undertakes home visits and appropriately escalates concerns about children.
11. The response to children who are missing or who have been missing has demonstrated sustained improvement. Children and young people are routinely offered a return home interview, with skilled workers employed to undertake such interviews. While clearly an improving picture, information from such interviews is not consistently used effectively to inform planning. A specialist coordinator for children who go missing, located within the MASH, provides good oversight of those children who are or have been missing and is proactive in ensuring actions necessary to protect such children are undertaken. The needs of children are effectively considered by the high-risk missing meeting. This includes consideration of the safeguarding needs of children in care placed in Waltham Forest by other local authorities.
12. The strategic and operational response to vulnerable adolescents is strong. A significant number of adolescents in Waltham Forest face one or more significant risks. The needs and vulnerabilities of these young people are well understood by practitioners and managers. There is excellent multi-agency working in relation to children who go missing, those at risk of child sexual exploitation and other contextual safeguarding concerns. Risks relating to actual, or potential risks of, child sexual exploitation are quickly identified. Effective gang intervention programmes have been commissioned to work with children and young people involved with or on the periphery of gangs. Specialist workers provide input across social work teams to try and divert young people from gang activity and help young people exit gangs.
13. Most disabled children receive a responsive service that is focused on their specific needs. Senior leaders are aware of staffing capacity issues within the disability enablement service. This has impacted on delays in the completion of a small number of children's assessments. The recruitment of additional capacity has been appropriately agreed and was being sourced while inspectors were on site, to ensure that children's needs are met in a timely manner.
14. When an actual or potential private fostering arrangement is identified, the local authority's response is prompt and thorough. Significant awareness-raising has increased the profile of private fostering within partner agencies and the diverse communities within Waltham Forest.

15. The management of allegations and concerns about adults who work with children is timely and well considered. Strong awareness-raising with partners has led to a continued increase in the contacts and referrals to the local authority designated officer. Actual and potential risks are identified well, with proportionate actions taken to protect children.
16. The local authority is managing its 'Prevent' duty effectively, with good-quality training and direct work where necessary. The work is well coordinated, and staff respond to the immediate needs of children, helping to identify and reduce the risks of terrorism and extremism.
17. Well-coordinated, proactive, multi-agency arrangements ensure a consistent approach to children and young people who are at risk of or who are affected by female genital mutilation.
18. The pre-proceedings phase of the public law outline is used effectively where children's needs escalate, which, in most cases, results in improved outcomes for children. Legal planning meetings are well recorded, and there are clear timescales for the actions required. The time in pre-proceedings is used well, with a wide range of services and interventions provided, including parenting programmes designed to promote positive change in parenting outcomes. Pre-proceedings work is tracked and monitored effectively to minimise delay. There is variability in the quality of letters before proceedings to parents, and a minority do not make it sufficiently clear, in language that is easy to understand, what parents need to do to improve outcomes for their children.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: Good

19. The local authority model of practice draws on families' strengths, focusing on maintaining children in their families wherever possible. An effective range of edge of care services, such as the intensive adolescent support team and the functional family therapy team, provide effective individualised support to enable children and young people to live safely within their families and communities.
20. The overwhelming majority of children who need to come into care do so in a timely manner and receive effective and sensitive intervention. Most children benefit from being looked after, and their outcomes improve as a consequence. This includes unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, who receive culturally sensitive and informed social work support.
21. When it is safe and appropriate for children to return home, transition plans are responsive to their needs and wishes. Clear consideration is given to the possibility of children returning home to live with members of

their extended family. Changes in children's circumstances or wishes are actively considered to determine whether a safe return can be achieved. When such decisions are taken, there is ongoing management oversight and children receive a good level of support.

22. Children's needs for permanence are considered at the earliest opportunity. Adoption is routinely considered for those children unable to live with their birth or extended families. The majority of children benefit from timely adoptions or placements with special guardians and connected carers. Recruitment processes for adopters are undertaken quickly, and the assessment, training and support for adopters are thorough. Good-quality assessments inform considered decisions about whether brothers and sisters live together or not. Carefully thought out introductions prepare adopters and children well. This ensures a smooth transition for children as they move from foster care to live with their adoptive parents. Assessments of special guardians are thorough, although the resulting plans in some cases are insufficiently specific to the needs of individual children.
23. Children's health needs are mostly well addressed. The effective engagement of the multi-agency health task and finish group has improved the timeliness of initial and review health assessments. These improvements are relatively recent, however, and the local authority recognises the need for these improvements to be sustained. There are some delays in completed health assessments being placed on children's records, which may result in social workers not always having up-to-date information regarding children's health to inform care planning.
24. Education is actively promoted for children in care and the virtual school is increasingly effective in ensuring that children make good progress and reach their potential. The quality and timeliness of personal education plans have improved significantly. Children benefit from regular reviews of their progress. The number of children persistently absent from school is reducing but still high at 14.1% and is a clear area for improvement identified by the virtual school.
25. Reviews for children in care are purposeful and held in a timely manner. Children and young people's views are clearly taken into account and they are actively encouraged to participate. The reviews are sensitively written to children, explaining their journey into care and the plans which are being made with them. Oversight of children's progress by independent reviewing officers is good and is recorded well in children's records.
26. The local authority recognises the challenge it has in sustaining placement stability for a minority of children. Some children undergo too many placement moves before a suitable match is made with permanent carers. Increasingly effective use is being made of placement stability meetings,

when there is a danger of disruption. The use of detailed matching grids helps to improve the quality of placement matching to ensure that placements can meet children's needs. Potential and actual risks to stability are well identified, and in cases considered by inspectors, a range of support to both children and carers has been put in place.

27. Children in care placed outside the local authority are well supported and have appropriate access to relevant health and education provision. If children are placed out of borough, this is most often in response to a safeguarding or complex need, and active consideration is given to children returning to a local placement when this is consistent with their needs. Appropriate notifications are made to host authorities. The local authority is aware of the need to strengthen consultation with host authorities to allow them to proactively plan before placing children at a distance. Active consideration is given to ensuring children retain purposeful contact with their families, communities and people important to them.
28. Social workers have good relationships with children. Children receive regular visits from their social workers. Children's wishes and feelings are actively sought and acted on. Sensitive and thoughtful individualised work helps children understand their life journey and influences planning and interventions for them. Children's contact with their families is planned effectively and managed well.
29. Foster carer recruitment, training and approvals are timely and effective. The joint fostering and adoption panel meets regularly, is well chaired and carries out its core duties robustly. Information presented to panel is of a good standard. Foster carers report that they feel part of the professional network and are well supported through training and support groups.
30. The majority of pathway plans for care leavers are routinely completed and reviewed. Some pathway plans are good; they are aspirational and cover all aspects of a young person's life and clearly demonstrate that young people were involved in the plan's development. However, some pathway plans are not thorough enough or updated after significant changes in young people's circumstances. This leads to a lack of clarity in relation to actions required to improve care leavers' well-being.
31. Most care leavers are well supported by leaving care coaches who act as personal advisers. The leaving care coaches know the care leavers well and actively look to promote their welfare. In a minority of cases considered by inspectors, the level of contact that young people had with their coach was insufficient considering their level of need. Most care leavers are well supported to develop their independence skills through the use of specific and targeted support that is delivered by foster carers, local authority staff and accommodation providers.

32. A positive and proactive approach ensures that most care leavers are engaged in education, employment or training opportunities. While the health needs of care leavers are mostly well recognised, care leavers are not routinely being given their health histories to help them make informed choices regarding their future healthcare.
33. The vast majority of care leavers benefit from a good range of suitable accommodation. A strong commitment to staying put results in high numbers of care leavers staying in such arrangements beyond their eighteenth birthdays, including several young people who are well into their twenties.
34. There is a strong local offer to care leavers that identifies their rights and entitlements. Care leavers have been actively involved in its creation, implementation and review.
35. The children in care council is appropriately influential. It provides a platform for children in care, so that they can give their views and provide feedback on important issues discussed at the corporate parenting panel. The children in care council provides a positive place for children to meet, socialise and exchange views. It has recently delivered insightful training, entitled 'In my Shoes', to social workers on their experiences, enhancing social workers' understanding of these experiences.

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

36. Senior leaders, managers and politicians are highly effective, ambitious and passionate about improving outcomes for children and young people and strive to provide excellent outcomes for them. Robust governance arrangements and effective scrutiny of service provision are ensuring that performance is continuously improving. They are highly aspirational and effective advocates for all children in Waltham Forest, and the quality of services and practice has significantly improved as a result. This is commendable given the context of high levels of deprivation, substance misuse, knife-related crime and gang-related activities.
37. Effective and mature partnerships across all agencies are very well established at strategic and operational levels, and this is a real strength of the local authority. Formal arrangements exist to challenge and further develop relationships, which leads to a shared and cohesive understanding of aligned priorities and actions. Strong, effective and visible partnership-working is evident in the highly purposeful work with young people at risk of various forms of exploitation.

38. Senior managers know the quality of frontline practice very well, informed by relevant performance information and enhanced by shadowing workers, observing practice and engaging with young people in a meaningful way. Sound decisions, taken with the right level of confidence and authority, ensure that children receive the right level of service when they first need it. A firm commitment to funding early help provision and a raft of edge of care provision supports the ethos and belief that children's needs are best met at the earliest opportunity and, wherever possible, within their family network.
39. Routine safeguarding assurance meetings with the corporate director of children's services fully inform the chief executive and elected members on the quality of frontline practice. This results in an excellent corporate understanding of safeguarding and the good quality of social work practice. The attendance of key partners at a senior level is a strength and enhances the strong sense of partnership and child-focused working. Highly effective scrutiny of performance information by elected members has led to specific and targeted focus on key areas of risk, for example school attendance of young people on the periphery of gang involvement.
40. Quality assurance activity has much improved since the previous inspection. The local authority undertakes a significant number of relevant audits relating to a wide range of types of service delivery. This contributes to the local authority's very well-informed understanding of areas that require improvement and of what needs to be done to make services consistently good. Trends and themes from audits are used very effectively to inform the training and development programme. Actions from audits are identified, with routine follow up to ensure that they are completed. Social workers are appropriately involved in the completion of audits to help their understanding of what constitutes good or outstanding practice. This contributes to an environment where good social work practice can flourish.
41. The local authority is very proactive in seeking the views of children and families on a range of activities, including their experiences of child protection conferences and the impact of child protection or child in need planning. There is good consideration given to further ways of gathering feedback to widen the knowledge gathered from children and families in order to support the high ambition for ongoing development and improvement. The views of children in care are routinely and actively sought to inform the progress of pledge promises. Learning is clearly understood from such feedback, as well as complaints, and relevant timely actions are devised in response to the thematic analysis of complaints made.
42. Highly effective commissioning arrangements informed by a robust assessment of local needs result in services that are reflective of, and

sensitive to, the diversity of culture, religion, and ethnicity of families in Waltham Forest. The detailed and informed sufficiency strategy is responsive to new challenges and the local authority is aware of pressures placed on the service due to the increase in demand.

43. Staff are skilled and thoughtful and show a strong commitment to the delivery of good services to children. They feel supported and report that managers and leaders are easily accessible and approachable. Social workers appreciate the opportunity to continually develop and progress in their careers and are supported to do so. The workforce strategy is effective, resulting in increased numbers of permanent staff, which means that children now have fewer changes of social worker. The effective assessed year in supported employment enables workers to develop skills with children who have complex needs, developing their confidence and competence in relationship-based social work. The local authority is aware of the potential effects of increases in demand and the consequent impact on social workers' caseloads, and there are plans to address this issue.
44. Work with the police to identify specific risks to children placed in Waltham Forest by other local authorities is highly effective. A detailed analysis of this group identifies those most at risk, and contact is made with the placing local authority. This has resulted in robust challenges to the placing local authorities about the effectiveness and safety of the care planning for vulnerable children.
45. Elected members, leaders and operational managers have made clear and tangible improvements in corporate parenting. They are now very good corporate parents because they are proactive, highly ambitious and aspirational for children in care and care leavers and take pride in their achievements. Their commitment to further improving outcomes for care leavers is exemplified by the very high numbers of care leavers receiving effective support in staying put arrangements well into their twenties.



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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.gov.uk/ofsted

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