

London Borough of Redbridge

Inspection of children's social care services

Inspection dates: 29 April 2019 to 3 May 2019

Lead inspector: Louise Hocking
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	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding

Children's services in Redbridge are outstanding. The appointment of the current director of children's services (DCS) in October 2016 led to the further strengthening of services following the previous inspection in 2016, when services were judged to be good. He is supported effectively by purposeful and informed political leaders and a stable and appropriately authoritative senior management team. Senior managers and leaders demonstrate relentless drive and ambition for children, which lead to the provision of consistently strong and highly effective services for them.

This exceptional leadership is, in equal parts, enabling and challenging, promoting best practice and innovation. Staff enjoy working in Redbridge. They feel safe and well supported. This results in purposeful work to keep children at home safely whenever it is possible and safe to do so. This exemplary management has created conditions that afford workers the time, professional expertise and capacity to get to know children and young people well and exercise their professional expertise. This best practice secures positive experiences and good progress for children.

The changing nature of the needs of Redbridge children and young people means that expertise and services need to be developed to address emerging risks associated with gangs, county lines and exploitation. Leaders and managers are ensuring that they understand these changing needs and are meeting these challenges well. There is clear evidence of a reflective and questioning working culture, and this results in a local authority that knows itself well and takes determined and proactive steps to improve outcomes for children.

Purposeful and persistent activity has resulted in a significant and widespread strengthening of key areas of practice since 2016. For example, independent reviewing officers offer strong challenge and oversight, and permanence planning is carefully tracked and begins at the earliest opportunity. Robust assessments of connected carers are carefully overseen. Services found to be outstanding in 2016, including the 'front door', have been further enhanced, meaning that even the best services have further improved.

Children in care receive a thoughtful and proactive service from workers who know them exceptionally well. Direct work and the promotion of the voice of the child are particularly strong. Carers provide stable homes and are supportive and ambitious for the children for whom they care. The local authority has an effective mechanism that informs and assures leaders about the quality of practice across all service areas. This has enabled senior managers to develop ambitious and credible plans to further improve services for all care leavers so that they receive consistently good planning and support into adulthood.

The service for care leavers is provided through a commissioned service and has been a priority area for development for senior managers. Progress has been made for care leavers and the pace has increased since a focused visit in December 2018. However, there is still more work to be done to ensure consistency of experience for all care leavers. Senior strategic overview and ownership of the service for care leavers ensure that this focus continues to build further on the achievements so far.

What needs to improve

- The consistency of the quality of practice for all care leavers.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection are: Outstanding

1. Children who require help or protection in Redbridge receive an outstanding service. In 2016, services were good, with the 'front door' described as outstanding. Since then, services, including those at the front door, have been further enhanced and refined, making good use of innovative practice. The existing strong service has been enhanced by additional capacity and dedicated specialist roles. Children and their families receive a timely service that best fits their needs.
2. The front door is a model of efficiency and excellence. It offers a service that is flexible, responsive and dynamic. A reflective culture is evident within the system and clear processes enable practitioners to take prompt action to reduce risks for children. This culture promotes continuous professional dialogue in which managers proactively and supportively question and challenge practitioners to ensure the right outcomes for children. This environment promotes best practice, providing a reflective space in the fast-paced, high-risk work of the front door and MASH service, and ensures that decisions are fully considered so that children are safeguarded and protected.
3. The emergency duty service is highly effective, offering a well-supported service to children and their families out of hours. It is child-focused and is appropriately challenging to other professionals when needed, for example if a young person is held inappropriately in police custody. The flexibility of the service has been enhanced by a pool of support workers. This ensures that children are accompanied to placements without delay.
4. The needs of all children are responded to swiftly, whatever the level of risk. Thresholds are appropriately considered and consistently applied. Consent is routinely sought. All contacts about children are progressed swiftly. The range of services in the MASH, including the early intervention triage team, ensures that children receive the right level of support and service at the right time. A 'daily divert' meeting ensures that children receive the most appropriate service at the outset.
5. The reconfiguration of the 'families together' hub has enhanced the range of services available to best meet the local changing needs. Since April 2018, the innovative family intervention team (FIT) has provided a suite of preventative services for 11- to 17-year-olds at risk of exploitation. It is a flexible, multi-skilled service that is highly successful in providing a preventative service for children with the highest levels of need. The team includes embedded specialist roles, such as

gangs workers, to focus on where the need is known to be highest risk. This highly successful service prevents children from becoming looked after unnecessarily and protects children from some of the highest risks. It offers a proactive and empowering model for families, including the effective use of family group conferences. Current development work includes a sophisticated exploitation mapping process. The impact of the FIT service was commented on very positively by the local judiciary.

6. Where children are at high risk of harm, authoritative action ensures that the MASH social worker and the assessment duty team work simultaneously to provide an immediate and fully informed joint response. The research and the analysis by the MASH social workers of incoming cases are of an exceptionally high standard. The MASH service ensures that it uses all information available to have a comprehensive understanding and be fully informed. This enables prompt action to be taken to mitigate risks to children.
7. Strategy discussions take place promptly and always with the most relevant police team attending, for example community safety for domestic violence, the gangs unit for serious youth violence or the police child abuse investigation team (CAIT) when there are allegations of abuse. This means that the most up-to-date information is available and that appropriate plans are made for any joint enquiries. Social workers undertaking child protection enquiries attend strategy discussions to share relevant information first-hand. Education and health representatives are not consistently in attendance, although no detrimental impact was found for children. Managers use their discretion wisely, and will proceed with urgent strategy discussions with health and education information provided by the MASH social worker through the screening processes as and when required.
8. Children who require a statutory assessment receive a timely and sensitive service that is proportionate to need. Work is allocated immediately, and children are visited promptly and with sufficient frequency for social workers to fully understand their needs. There is timely engagement with children and their families. This results in assessments that are clear and well informed, enabling a coherent plan for future work. Such work is strengths-based, and skilful practitioners carefully balance risks and feel confident to voice any uncertainties. This includes good use of research to enhance and inform thorough analysis of risk and resilience factors.
9. Thorough and thoughtful assessments inform effective and appropriate plans for children. Children on child protection plans are visited frequently, and such plans are used as live, dynamic documents to support and address changing levels of risk effectively. When it is appropriate, subject to age and understanding, safety plans are undertaken directly with children. Child protection conferences evidence meaningful work and active engagement with parents on issues of risk. Written feedback is sought from parents who experience child protection processes and this is used by managers to understand and improve the service provided. Nearly 90% of parents said that they were able and supported to participate in the child protection process.

10. Children in need are visited frequently and according to their needs. They are encouraged to participate in plans made for them, and they benefit from the positive direct work that they receive. Plans for children are stepped up or stepped down appropriately, and the threshold for a child in need is inclusive and supportive to children and families. Senior managers had previously identified the service to children in need as an area for practice improvement. This has since resulted in better quality child in need plans, and purposeful and effective work. It is evident that the quality of social work relationships with parents and children is creating change and increasing safety for children on child protection and child in need plans.
11. Young people who present as homeless are consistently offered an assessment and are appropriately asked if they wish to be looked after in care. Accommodation is immediately provided when required, and the young people are allocated a social worker to undertake an assessment. Joint screening with housing or the offer of mediation are not a routine part of the practice for homeless young people.
12. Disabled children receive an effective service that is appropriate for their needs. Child protection work is strong, and disabled children in care are provided with secure permanent homes through specialist foster care or adoption. The transition service ensures that young people have a supported and seamless transition to adult services.
13. Children who go missing, from home or care, are offered a return home interview and are provided with a service that best fits their need according to the specific 'push-and-pull' factors. An extensive risk assessment is undertaken for children where the risk is greatest. Strategy discussions take place if required, and there is a robust system in the MASH service when they receive a notification for a child not previously known to them. A designated officer provides a clear and thorough service, and their proactive work has seen referrals about adults who may present a risk to children increase from 240 to 350 in the last year.
14. All work is underpinned by strong, regular management oversight and decision-making. All staff receive regular supervision and this has been maintained, even when there have been changes in manager. There is clear, consistent management direction at the point of allocation, regular dynamic management oversight and considered reflective management sign-off of all work undertaken. This ensures that all children have the right service at the right time, that work undertaken with them is timely and purposeful, and that they are supported by skilled practitioners. Manageable caseloads ensure that social workers have sufficient time to see children and understand their needs. The workforce has stabilised, and staff report that they are supported well.

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

15. Children in care in Redbridge benefit from a strong service that is creative and thoughtful. This is commendable within the context of the changing and increasingly complex range of needs of children. Children who need to come into care do so at the right time. The consistent workforce ensures stable social work relationships with children and foster carers. Frontline social workers are enabled and supported to propose creative care plans that are seen to have successfully influenced the course of children's lives. This has included teenagers returning home from residential care with strong and effective support in place.
16. Children are visited regularly, including when they are placed at a distance, and purposeful work is undertaken with them. The voice of each child is strong, including for brothers and sisters. Case notes helpfully reflect the tone and the style of each engagement. Social workers know children's likes, dislikes, hobbies and interests and the records accurately capture children's personalities. Direct work is undertaken, including by independent reviewing officers. Care plans are clear, concise and comprehensive. Risk assessments are completed to ensure that children are protected, and that other professionals fully understand and meet children's needs.
17. The relatively low number of children in care in Redbridge is a result of purposeful planning. There is a thorough understanding of children's needs and a high degree of support in place to keep them at home, when it is safe to do so. Children who come into care are placed in appropriate placements and placement stability is good. Permanency planning is embedded in practice, with supportive processes such as the permanency tracking panel to robustly monitor this. High-quality assessments inform planning when a child returns home from care, most usually on a child in need plan. Intensive and creative support packages mean that this support is sustained and effective when children return home.
18. Care proceedings are initiated when required and pre-proceedings and court work are of a consistently good quality. Cafcass and the local judiciary reported favourably on the high-quality and timely pre-proceedings and care proceedings work undertaken in Redbridge.
19. The fostering service is highly effective, is well run and has a positive impact on children's lives. Children experience nurturing care in stable placements. Staff are well supported and suitably skilled. Foster carers feel valued and listened to. The chair of the effective fostering and adoption panel reports significant improvements in the timeliness and quality of both assessments and annual reviews.
20. Since the previous inspection in 2016, concerted and continuous effort has ensured that staff understand the importance of permanence planning. This includes the need for early permanence, and the majority of children recently placed have benefited from either early permanence with a relative or a foster to adopt

placement. This work is overseen effectively by independent reviewing officers, supervisors and senior managers. There are no children currently waiting for an adoptive placement. Redbridge is ambitious for children and secures permanence for children successfully, including children who have complex needs and disabilities.

21. A secure and successful embedded partnership with a voluntary adoption agency results in a rigorous service for children, and staff have developed a high degree of expertise in permanence planning. The long-standing nature of the relationship means that the current move to a regional adoption agency (Coram Capital Ambitious for Adoption) is an extension of an already successful contracted arrangement. There is good consideration of family and friends as potential carers for children and such assessments are robust. The service has significantly improved the oversight and monitoring of all connected carers since 2016, to ensure their timely approval.
22. The exceptional virtual school team is well established and well respected. The team has cultivated excellent relationships with schools and social care teams and continues to provide a highly effective service. Personal education plans are timely, giving a clear sense that children are involved in their development. Children value the wide range of opportunities offered by the virtual school team, including enrichment events and flexible use of the pupil premium plus. Education providers are highly complimentary about the work of the virtual school staff, describing them as child-centred, creative and refreshing in their approach.
23. Children in care generally achieve well in education and make good progress relative to their starting points. The virtual school carefully tracks the progress and attendance of all pupils and has worked closely with schools to improve the attendance of a small group of children who have attendance below 90% and the highest range of complex needs. Impressive and swift improvements have been seen for nearly half of these children as a result. Children over the age of 16 represent the largest group of children in care, and 82% of these children are in education, employment or training.
24. Frontline managers in the looked after service scrutinise a suite of twice-weekly reports to oversee performance. This includes looking at any young people missing from care. The new practice manager role in the looked after children service adds additional management oversight and their work is being strengthened through a weekly half-day development programme. This offers a clear career pathway for social workers and an additional practice lead on specific areas of practice development.
25. The service for care leavers is currently provided through a commissioned partnership and provides a service that was considered to have strengths but ultimately to require improvement to be good in 2016. This service has been a priority area for development, with the local authority providing a consistent and careful consideration of the quality of service provision through the leaving care

partnership board. Immediate improvements were implemented, including a separate annual event specifically to celebrate the achievements and successes of care leavers.

26. Redbridge is in touch with almost all care leavers. Closer working with the housing service over the last two years in the borough has increased both the supply and the quality of accommodation, resulting in all care leavers living in suitable accommodation. A high number of care leavers are in employment, education or training, with improvements for both age groups (82% of 17- to 18-year-olds and 65% for 19- to 21-year-olds). From a relatively small group of care leavers, 28 young people are at university. Young people are successfully completing their courses.
27. Senior managers invited scrutiny of the service for care leavers through a recent focused visit. This resulted in a detailed development plan to expedite further progress to the service for care leavers and is overseen by elected members, the corporate parenting panel and a dedicated task and finish group. Significant progress has been made with many aspects of the plan. However, some actions are appropriately taking longer to achieve in order to ensure that care leavers are actively and fully involved in service design and delivery.
28. Despite the investment and oversight provided by local authority senior managers, the day-to-day service for care leavers remains variable, with young people receiving different experiences and levels of support. Some casework practice is strong, but the service offered by the external provider has been hindered by changes in staffing and management within the contract.

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

29. The DCS and his management team provide exemplary leadership that is highly effective in ensuring excellent progress and experiences for children. When a dedicated focus is needed to improve the service for children, such as the partnership service for care leavers, senior managers ensure that they provide strong drive and oversight and proactively re-evaluate the impact of contracted services.
30. Leaders and senior managers demonstrate a high degree of self-awareness and exceptional ambition that lead to strong and continuously improving services. Leaders and managers have built on their strong track record, ensuring that services for children in Redbridge have strengthened further since the inspection in 2016, and the leadership style has led to a firmly established culture of creativity and innovation. Children benefit from well-designed and well-resourced services delivered through skilled and thoughtful practitioners. Highly effective practice is understood, embedded and recognised; for example, the MASH team was named as the council 'team of the year' at the whole council awards.

31. The DCS has very effectively engaged with partners, initiating projects and securing funding to innovate and build on service provision and quality of understanding in areas of known risk, including domestic abuse, radicalisation, exploitation, female genital mutilation and placement choice.
32. Senior managers in Redbridge have a proven track record of successfully offering services to children through clear contracted or commissioned arrangements. They do this extremely well to provide specialisms to enhance services for children. Current examples include the strong services for children who require adoption and the partnership offering specialist direct work with young people at risk of gang affiliation and exploitation.
33. The local authority has provided careful and continuous monitoring and oversight of the contracted service for care leavers and has proactively escalated the oversight of this service. Leaders requested that this service be the topic for the focused visit to help consolidate their understanding. Following the focused visit in December 2018, several steps were immediately taken to develop the service, including the establishment of a task and finish group. The robust and detailed plan to develop the service further has been presented to the scrutiny committee, with the direct scrutiny being provided by the leaving care partnership board.
34. Highly committed political support ensures that children are given a rightful strategic priority in the wider council. Both the lead member and the chief executive meet regularly with young people, taking every opportunity to elicit their views and to act on them. They know the children individually and are highly ambitious on their behalf to make progress, ensuring that they have the right services for their needs. This has included a strategic overview of the improvement plan for the care leaving service being considered by the scrutiny committee.
35. Corporate parenting in Redbridge is rigorous and ambitious. Councillors present a strong challenge to officers and are well-informed corporate parents. The role of children is prioritised at the corporate parenting panel, where children attend and present their own research and proposals. This results in measurable, positive changes that benefit all children. In one example, a young member of the junior children in care council presented her argument about the clothing allowance. This successfully resulted in the implementation of a new school uniform allowance for all children.
36. The DCS strikes an excellent balance between knowing the needs of individual children and ensuring that this knowledge results in high-level strategic planning and service provision. The FIT service is an example of innovative strategic oversight and analysis that resulted in resources being invested at an operational level as well as at a case level. This ensures that children do not come into care if they can be successfully supported within their families, and offers a different service that better meets children's needs from the same level of funding. This

shows that senior leaders and managers are highly effective in using their resources to ensure maximum impact for children.

37. Managers have a strong grip on practice at all levels. They use a range of approaches to oversee and understand what is happening for children. A well-used and highly effective 'need to know' process results in all relevant managers, including senior managers, being aware of the children whose needs are greatest. For children at a particularly high risk, the need to know process is a routine part of social workers' reporting on a weekly basis.
38. Despite the high level of performance and service provision, leaders and senior managers in Redbridge are relentlessly purposeful and strive to do more. There is a clear focus on how things could be even better, and they describe this as a 'restless' approach. It can be seen to best effect in their accurate self-evaluation, where the ambition is to always aim to do more than has already been achieved. Discernible progress is evident from the inspection in 2016, when the service overall was judged to be good. This progress and consistency can be seen in areas of specialised practice, impacting on smaller numbers of children at risk of honour-based violence, female genital mutilation and radicalisation, or for children who require private fostering. It is a strong indicator of good practice that the diverse needs of all children are met well.
39. Regular interrogation of high-quality performance information results in 'deep dives' into any area of potential concern, the most recent being a focus on initial health assessments. Work is underway through the looked after children and health sub-group to improve timeliness for initial health assessments, and improvements are evident in more recent practice. Senior managers ensure that they are aware of all areas that require close examination in order to understand any changes in performance. A wide range of regular and accurate audit activity supports this. Learning translates into effective action, including bite-sized briefings, job shadowing, feedback to staff, and tracking actions through supervision. The impact is visible, for example in the improvements to services for children in need.
40. Management oversight of experiences for children in Redbridge is exceptional. The high quality of management is obvious and has impact at all levels. Management involvement, supervision and case direction provide exceptional analysis and professional challenge. This means that children's needs and the services they receive are put under comprehensive scrutiny and are well considered. Staff feel safe and supported, with accessible managers who help them to reflect on their work. Case direction from frontline and middle managers in Redbridge is extensive, thorough, analytical and professionally challenging. Operational managers understand that they are leaders of their individual services. Good performance management information means that managers know what is happening in their services and take decisive action to ensure progress for children. This results in purposeful work to ensure that only the children who need to come into care do so, and that when children return home, they are supported to be at home safely.

41. Staff retention and recruitment have historically been challenges that Redbridge has met well and continue to focus on. This is achieved through understanding what makes a role feel rewarding for practitioners. As a result, significant recent funding has been agreed for a specific relationship-based practice model to enhance the experiences of both children and staff. Staff turnover is carefully monitored and understood by senior managers and at scrutiny panel, and sickness levels are low. Use of agency staff has consistently gone down, from 63 in July 2017 to 39 in July 2018, to the current figure of 23. Many agency staff have taken on permanent appointments. Manageable caseloads, supportive and stimulating case discussion and professionally empowered practice have resulted in a contented and skilled workforce that enjoys working in Redbridge. Creative social work and lateral thinking are encouraged in frontline practitioners. They know the children well and speak confidently about their own roles and purpose. Staff can see that a clear career pathway is available, with a comprehensive training package.
42. Partnership working is strong, and the senior managers are collaborative and outward-looking. This ensures that leaders both share and benefit from best practice and also enables a wider range of services for children. The DCS chairs the multi-agency corporate serious crime group to steer all agencies to meet the changing needs of local children. Recent initiatives include participating in separate pilot projects relating to radicalisation, restorative justice and domestic abuse, a sub-regional residential project to expand local placement provision and the implementation of a grant to set up a 'Box Up Crime' diversion scheme.



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