

Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea

Inspection of children's social care services

Inspection dates: 9 September 2019 to 13 September 2019

**Lead inspector: Louise Warren
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	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding

Services for children who need help and protection, children in care and care leavers in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea are outstanding. Since the previous inspection in 2016, excellent services and high-quality social work practice have been very well sustained. Senior leadership is strong and aspirational; leaders continue to strengthen, improve and innovate services to benefit children and their families. Leaders and senior managers work together highly effectively within a bi-borough approach to provide excellent strategic and some shared operational services with Westminster City Council, and with the London Borough of

Hammersmith and Fulham. This includes the highly effective multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) and the well-regarded centre for systemic practice.

The children's workforce is very stable, highly experienced and trained to a high standard. The successful and consistent use of the established systemic practice model enables staff to develop long-lasting, caring and continuous relationships with children and families, who they know very well. This is a fundamental success and considerable strength of practice, as it is very well established across all services throughout the borough. This culture and approach provide a highly effective safeguarding service that promotes working to sustain effective positive change and improve the outcomes for children and their families.

For children who cannot live with their birth parents, permanence and stability are achieved highly effectively and in a timely manner. Children are very well supported by a range of multi-agency services. The service is well resourced, and staff have manageable caseloads and ready access to well-trained professional clinicians and managers. This promotes and delivers exemplary practice.

Direct work with children in care and with children who need help and protection is highly skilled and purposeful. Such practice helps children to understand their histories while providing highly effective emotional help and support. Children's views, wishes and feelings are at the very core of the support they receive.

Senior leaders know the needs of their local communities very well and this is reflected in their accurate and comprehensive self-assessment. They successfully innovate and improve services so that children and their families receive highly individualised help and support to sustain changes and improve outcomes.

What needs to improve

- Strategy meetings to include the routine involvement of health professionals to support and contribute to multi-agency information-sharing and decision-making.
- Plans for children to include specific actions and timeframes, so that managers, professionals, children and families know what they need to do and by when.

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

1. Families receive excellent early help services that are very well established and offer an exceptionally broad range of support to children and families in the community. Services are very well integrated within children's social care, embody the principles of systemic practice and are strongly embedded into their localities. This means that children and their families are well supported and helped to address emerging concerns quickly, avoiding the need for more intensive statutory services.
2. Early help professionals are highly experienced. They work collaboratively and well with social workers and partner services to provide highly effective help. Early help assessments of need are insightful and thorough, and they routinely lead to children and families being provided with a strong offer of help and support. The interface between early help and statutory services is very well managed. Risk is well understood. Children's cases step up to social work intervention quickly if risks escalate.
3. The edge of care service, 'the families forward team', provides a swift and responsive service so that vulnerable children and their parents can forge relationships of trust with skilled professionals who help reduce and mitigate risks. Packages of extensive and very regular support seven days a week help to stabilise and enhance children's lives and enable them to live in their families.
4. Threshold decisions are made appropriately and are informed by a good range of professionals who understand them, apply them consistently and provide relevant information for sound decision-making. Children are seen swiftly within a timescale appropriate to their level of need and risk.
5. Referrals are comprehensive and, where there is risk of harm, they are responded to swiftly by locality teams. Referral information is assessed and analysed well, and children are seen. This comprehensive process enables practitioners to decide the direction of future work with children and families. This is a significant strength, ensuring that children are effectively safeguarded.
6. The three boroughs share the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), and the work within this team is highly effective. Workers respond promptly to referrals that come into the service that require further information to inform the next steps for children. Proportionate checks are undertaken with co-located professionals who work closely together and collaborate very well. Consent is routinely sought, or appropriately overridden to ensure that children are safeguarded. Once checks have been completed, social workers comprehensively analyse the information obtained, alongside historical information held. Management oversight is rigorous, providing a clear recorded rationale regarding the next steps to take to help, support and protect children.

7. The emergency duty service (EDT) is hosted by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and is a sound service that responds in a timely way to contacts for all three of the boroughs. Management support and decision-making is consistently appropriate to the level of risk, and on-call managers make good use of both alerts from day services and emergency calls. Support from the police is available and utilised effectively when there are concerns for children's welfare. Recording of work specifically for the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea was not entered directly into their case management electronic system. However, senior managers immediately acted to remedy this.
8. Where children are at risk of significant harm, strategy discussions are held by professionals swiftly, are well informed and make clear decisions about next steps to effectively protect children. While health information is often made available to inform decision-making, for a small number of children it is sometimes available after the event or not at all, and this affects the timeliness and quality of decision-making for children.
9. Child protection enquiries are very effective and timely in identifying risks and required actions to help to reduce risks to children. When risks escalate, actions are taken to safeguard children quickly and to ensure that appropriate and immediate support is provided. For vulnerable adolescents, highly effective multi-agency support is provided to mitigate any risks that children may be experiencing.
10. Assessments are strong, suitably analytical and provide powerful insight into the lives of children and families. Thorough consideration is given to cultural issues and protected characteristics to fully reflect children's needs and to understand the impact this has on children and their families.
11. Planning for children and their families is relationship-based and children and families are very well engaged and supported by professionals. However, not all plans are clear or specific enough about what needs to change within achievable timescales so that children and families can understand what they and other professionals need to do to achieve improved outcomes.
12. Children who are, or who may be, at risk of harm from unsuitable or dangerous adults and volunteers working or volunteering with them are safeguarded effectively by an experienced and well-informed bi-borough designated officer service. Thresholds for levels of intervention and investigation are clear, and awareness-raising and joint work with schools safeguarding leads is highly developed. Referral investigations and outcomes are closely tracked, and most are timely. More complex investigations are skilfully managed through strategy meetings and specialist meetings that examine complexities closely, ensuring well-integrated multi-agency planning.
13. The culture of collaborative working between managers and professional staff that is embedded within the relationship model of systemic practice means that

care and sensitivity to the needs of children are highly developed and lead to strong social work practice. Management oversight and scrutiny, including by child protection chairs and independent reviewing officers, are clear and evident on children's records. For some children, this oversight could be strengthened further by a clearer focus and recording of the pace of change and direction required for children and their families to reach their agreed outcomes.

14. Work undertaken during pre-proceedings and care proceedings has a clear purpose to protect children and progress planning in a timely manner. Letters before proceedings are clear about the expectations of parents. Family group conferencing is used well to explore support networks and alternative family placements. Specialist multi-disciplinary family assessment service assessments undertaken during proceedings are of a very high standard. They appropriately focus on the child's needs and parents' capacity to meet them for the duration of their childhood.
15. Children are seen regularly and are seen alone. Manageable workloads mean that skilled social workers can spend quality time with children to get to know them well and build strong relationships with them. Children enjoy the relationships they have with their workers. Purposeful direct work is of a high quality and reflects children's individual circumstances, wishes and feelings. This is well recorded in key documents to inform progress planning for children. Inspectors found strong evidence of clinicians adding significant input and thoughtful reflection to help understand families' and children's circumstances fully. This enhances the existing high quality of social work practice. Children have good access to advocacy services.
16. Disabled children receive a strong service that makes a positive difference to their lives. Social workers are highly effective in addressing the needs of disabled children, in identifying when they are at risk of harm, and in intervening to ensure their safety. The presence of two designated workers within the team ensures a joined-up transition to adult services for children. Co-location with the short breaks teams means that, when children need to be stepped up to receive a statutory social work service, this is swiftly and effectively managed.
17. Children who are at risk due to episodes of going missing, or criminal or sexual exploitation, are appropriately safeguarded. Action to address such risks is timely, well considered and focused, drawing on a broad range of available services and specialist professionals. Strategy discussions for children who are missing are used well to coordinate and plan interventions, and children and young people receive timely return home interviews, the learning from which is used well to inform future interventions.
18. A range of highly impressive services are in place to tackle risk from involvement in gangs and child sexual exploitation. A broad range of relevant professionals and services work with young people. This means that risks for children and young people are accurately identified, children are well engaged, and

interventions are targeted effectively to limit or reduce risks. Informed and effective use of assessment tools and interventions are in place to reduce risk and ensure that young people are recognised as victims and do not unnecessarily get drawn into the criminal justice system.

19. A borough-specific criminal exploitation and child sexual abuse coordinator plays an important and effective role in raising awareness and improving workers' skills through consultation and support. They hold regular meetings with named child sexual exploitation 'champions', and add significant value to planning in individual young people's cases due to the overview of this work across the boroughs.
20. Coordinated services minimise the risk to children and young people who are out of education. Most have complex or challenging needs. Strong partnership work, for example through the Vulnerable Children's Collaborative, ensures that appropriate provision is quickly identified. Leaders are very skilful at identifying the barriers young people face, and they implement effective strategies to remove them. Regular reporting and tracking of progress help leaders to hold the various services to account. For children who are electively home educated, the local authority has very effective systems in place to satisfy itself that the children's welfare is safeguarded, and that they are receiving suitable education.
21. Young people who present as homeless receive a strong and effective service; they are swiftly and appropriately assessed to see if they need to come into care. Management oversight is clear and social workers make young people aware of their right to accommodation and to becoming looked after if their needs require this.
22. The local authority has a well-established and structured bi-borough approach to private fostering, which is strongly linked to the Local Safeguarding Children Board (soon to become the Local Children Safeguarding Partnership). This is effectively overseen by a senior manager to support such children. The local authority has recently worked very effectively with children who are privately fostered, although currently there are no children or families who require this support.

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

23. Children in care and care leavers receive an outstanding service from workers who know them exceptionally well and are caring and ambitious for them. Children only come into care when it is necessary and appropriate for them to do so. There is a strong commitment to support children to remain with their families, and a broad range of edge of care services are in place to achieve this, providing children and their families with the best opportunity to stay together safely and happily.

24. When children do come into care, all appropriate processes are very well followed, with timely initial reviews taking place to ensure that the needs of the child received into care, on whatever basis, are met to a high standard. For example, planned placements and a broad range of intelligently commissioned emergency accommodation are used to respond to specific circumstances, including placements for unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people. Children are supported to return home when it is safe and appropriate for them to do so, and there are individualised plans to achieve this for children.
25. When it is not possible for children to remain within their birth family, alternative permanence options are carefully considered. Court applications are timely, and evidence provided to the court is of a high standard to enable the judge to make the right decisions for children. Parallel planning occurs from an early stage. Close monitoring via individual permanency planning meetings means that most children who require permanence through adoption, special guardianship orders and long-term fostering achieve permanency with minimal delay.
26. There is a very strong and enduring culture of children being seen and seen alone and of all staff building continuous relationships with children. Social workers and clinicians, who are well-trained in the model of systemic practice, know children well, many for a number of years, and spend quality time with them. This practice is highly impressive and leads to children being sensitively cared for, visited regularly, and their views and wishes and feelings being reflected in the support and help they are given.
27. The children in care council represents children's views extremely well. Children and young people spoken to during the inspection were highly complimentary about the services and support they have received and their involvement in the development of services. They reported a very positive view of the local authority as their corporate parent.
28. Children are regularly seen by health professionals and are offered a wide range of support and advice by specialist nurses, whether they live in or out of the borough. Appropriate and systematic changes to improve commissioning arrangements are being made for initial health assessments. Care leavers receive comprehensive information about their health histories, so that they can manage their own health needs in the future. Children with emotional difficulties, including unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, have access to a wide range of therapeutic support, tailored to their needs.
29. The well-resourced and well-led virtual school service provides effective support for children and young people in care. Given their starting points, children and young people make good progress in overcoming many of the barriers they face when engaging with learning. Personal education plans (PEPs) are well established and of high quality. A high proportion of young people are at university and some have achieved very positive outcomes given their starting point when they originally came into care.

30. Children live in homes that meet their needs and have been carefully chosen; they are thriving in permanent foster placements, residential care and semi-independent accommodation. Children living with connected persons or special guardians benefit from well-crafted support plans that address current and potential future needs. For a small number of children who have experienced some placement changes, leaders have acted to understand the reasons for this and increase the sufficiency and choice of placements for older vulnerable children.
31. The shared fostering service efficiently recruits potential carers who can meet the complex needs of children across all three boroughs. Foster carers reflect children's identities well, and there is good evidence of matching according to ethnicity, language and background. Foster care support is a strength of the service. This features wrap-around support services, systemic practice, mentoring and social work support, all of which enhance the stability of children's experiences in their foster homes. There is a recognition that there is more work to do to improve the choice of foster carers and placement stability, and this is well reflected in additional support being made available to foster carers.
32. Children placed for permanence and adoption benefit from excellent and timely sensitive social work practice, with positive matching with prospective adopters or special guardians to include consideration of culture and ethnicity. Children were placed quickly so that they could benefit from early attachments with their permanent carers. The adoption service provides an excellent service to adopters where comprehensive training is readily available. Post-order support is creative, prompt, bespoke and responsive to the needs of all the family. Adopters report that they feel listened to and are very well supported.
33. Children benefit from regular reviews, and social workers produce detailed updated assessments which consider all aspects, including recent events associated with children's lives. High numbers of children fully participate in their reviews. Reviews are often followed by a letter from the independent reviewing officers (IROs) to the child in child-friendly language, enabling children to have a personal account of their reviews. IROs know their children extremely well and routinely monitor their progress and welfare in between their six-monthly reviews.
34. Care plans are agreed with children in their reviews. However, sometimes plans lack clear recording of actions and timescales about who is specifically doing what and by when. This means that it is more difficult for children and their families to know what is planned to happen, and to ensure that the progress of all work can be clearly monitored.
35. Care leavers enjoy the continuity of high levels of support from their social workers or personal advisers, who are in touch with them regularly. They are

clearly pivotal figures in many care leavers' lives, often having known them for many years. Pathway planning assessment is continuous and thorough, with the delivery of pathway plans provided in the context of very strong relationships with the young people concerned.

36. Care leavers can 'stay put' where this is right for them and they are supported to achieve their dreams and aspirations. Young people spoken to by inspectors were confident and highly aspirational. Much work has been done to ensure that care leavers live in accommodation that is suitable to their needs; this includes well-informed commissioning to improve quality and to provide more local accommodation nearer or within the borough. Good use is made of high-quality semi-independent accommodation where care leavers are provided with life skills training by their keyworkers, equipping them well for their adult lives. Overall, there was a successfully flexible and responsive approach to finding young people safe and suitable accommodation.
37. Care leavers are aware of their entitlements and are supported in a wide range of leisure and enrichment opportunities, for instance gym membership, creative writing camps, art-based activities and team-building activities, which help develop young people's self-esteem, confidence and social skills. If required, additional educational support is provided should young people require additional help to reach their potential and achieve their aspirations. As a result, care leavers are making good and, in some cases, exceptional progress.

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

38. The impact of leaders to provide and sustain high-quality services and embed excellent social work practice is impressive. Senior leaders are experienced and knowledgeable and have a proactive approach to understanding the strengths and areas for development of children's services. There is strong corporate support from the wider council to provide high-quality social work services for children, including significant financial investment so that the conditions are in place for excellent social work practice to flourish. This means that children and their families benefit from highly qualified, skilled and experienced staff, who have manageable caseloads, high levels of support and training, and the benefit of very experienced clinicians to provide and assist in the delivery of very strong relationship-based social work practice. Since the last inspection, leaders have maintained their unwavering commitment to improving outcomes for children through systemic social work practice. This period of time includes their wide-ranging response to the devastating Grenfell Tower fire in 2017, and the ongoing impact of the tragedy on children, families and the local community.
39. Partnership arrangements are strong and function extremely well. The police report positive multi-agency relationships with the local authority, particularly within the MASH. Health partners work well with senior leaders to address

improvements to practice for children, including addressing the timeliness of initial health assessments, and delivering and implementing innovative services in targeted schools for the needs of children's emotional health and well-being. The Local Safeguarding Children Board, which is shortly to become the Local Safeguarding Children Partnership, has been carefully designed to address wider safeguarding issues, such as the focus on serious youth violence. There are positive relationships with the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) and the judiciary to ensure that joint work and important decisions about children's lives and situations are effective and timely. Strategic boards concerning children and vulnerable adults are well aligned, and there are regular interfaces between the key strategic leaders, including the directors of children's services and the chief executives across the three boroughs.

40. Since the previous inspection, services to children and young people at risk of sexual exploitation or of going missing have been further developed and strengthened. Senior leaders have joined these services up with a strong and evolving range of other services to tackle the risks to children from criminal exploitation, from gang affiliation and associated serious youth violence across the three boroughs. Staff now attend one strategic meeting: the gangs and multi-agency criminal exploitation meeting. This strategic oversight supports frontline professionals across the three boroughs to intervene effectively and to reduce risk to some of the most vulnerable young people. Wider strategic work in reducing school exclusions and in the newly launched youth services offer also ensures a strong focus on this vulnerable cohort is in place.
41. The local authority is an active, strong and ambitious corporate parent that positively supports and invests in children in care and care leavers, who benefit from decent housing, opportunities for leisure and enrichment, education, and other support to fulfil their aspirations. This very high level of commitment means that children in care and care leavers are offered an excellent service.
42. Strategic and innovative planning mean that there is a strong and ambitious vision to achieve placement sufficiency. Challenges are being faced robustly by recruiting new foster carers to fill the gap created by retirement and staying put placements, and the greater availability of 'move-on' accommodation as the number of care leavers is set to rise.
43. Senior leaders and managers have an excellent understanding of their service, which is reflected in the self-assessment. They have a clear line of sight to frontline practice. Clear and established performance management reports allow senior leaders to identify areas of practice requiring development and further improvement and address these swiftly and in detail to progress changes to practice. Examples of this are the response to a recent decline in performance in relation to placement stability figures, and the focus on the impact of child protection plans. Other mechanisms to understand social work practice include a highly effective practice group to improve practice further. The excellent bi-

borough practice standards handbook is a positive example of this innovative focus. A strongly embedded and long-standing practice week provides strong, inclusive and comprehensive oversight of social work practice. Monthly audit arrangements are highly reflective and participative and have been recently refreshed to seek to improve practice further by incorporating feedback from children and families into practice developments. The local authority continues to be an example of excellent practice and a source of support to other local authorities, as part of the Department for Education's 'partners in practice', while retaining a focus to maintain 'outstanding' practice across all services.

44. Senior leaders ensure that the workforce is highly capable and skilled at all levels of the organisation. Staff morale is high, and turnover is low. Staff reported that they enjoy working for the local authority. Staff are highly qualified, skilled and experienced. They embody the values of respect, integrity and sensitivity and visibly care about the children they are responsible for and their families. The strong value base of relationship-based social work and systemic practice, including access to clinicians for all social work teams, results in children and families receiving sensitive and thoughtful services to meet their needs.
45. Social workers report good support by their managers and senior managers, who are visible and supportive and know the children and families well. They have regular monthly supervision, clinical support, reflective sessions and access to informal support and manageable caseloads. Managers are well qualified and there has been effective investment in management capacity and the development and training of managers and staff. The extensive training and investment in systemic practice enables social workers to be skilled and confident in their work, building strong and enduring relationships to improve outcomes and sustained change for children and families.



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