

Inspection of City of London local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 23 to 27 September 2024

Lead inspector: Christine Kennet, His Majesty's Inspector

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

Children living or arriving in the City of London receive excellent services that are making a significant difference to their lives. Starting from the very strong service seen at the last inspection, a highly effective senior leadership team has developed services further and continued to make improvements. Strong political and corporate support has helped those in the leadership team to be excellent champions who support children and young people achieve their potential through to adulthood.

Children experience a stable, committed and skilled workforce, often keeping the same social worker throughout their journey, allowing consistent and trusting relationships to develop. Social workers, the virtual school and leaders share high aspirations for children and young people. Social workers enjoy excellent training in systemic practice, with a strong focus on equity and equality. This training, combined with moderate caseloads and regular, reflective supervision, allows impressive social work practice to flourish.

Creative work with commissioned and partner services enhances the practical and emotional support that children and families receive. This includes unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, who are the majority of the City of London's children in care and care leavers.

What needs to improve?

- Impact for children living in circumstances where there is domestic abuse
- The response to children who experience exploitation and youth violence.

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

1. Children and families receive timely and responsive early help services. Staff work closely with partners, undertaking joint visits in response to children's needs. Children and families receive services at a level appropriate to their needs within early help, including being supported with targeted services where needed. Early help assessments are thorough, thoughtfully written and sensitive to children's needs. They reflect children's ages and diversity, and offer insights into their lived experiences. Skilled and experienced workers capture a holistic family understanding through their observations and assessments. Team around the child plans include good input from multi-agency partners. The offer of multi-systemic therapy services is strengthening families' parenting skills.
2. The City of London works with a commissioned service and voluntary sector partners to provide a range of enrichment activities and social events that enable young carers to enjoy time away from their caring responsibilities.
3. Workers in the virtual multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) quickly process contacts. They understand issues of parental consent well and dispense with consent appropriately when indicated by presenting risks. However, the quality of agency partner referrals is variable, with some records not confirming whether consent has been sought or given. The response to referrals for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is a strength. Children's immediate needs for a warm welcome and accommodation, and for their cultural and religious needs, are met quickly.
4. Workers convene multi-agency strategy meetings promptly when risks escalate for children. Multi-agency attendance ensures shared action, which increases safety for children. The international component for a number of families adds complexity, but this is considered well and practice reflects engagement with children's services in other countries.
5. Social workers do recognise the immediate impact for children when domestic abuse is the prevailing risk factor. However, this is not always explored at sufficient depth and toolkits are not used consistently to understand all aspects, such as financial, emotional, coercive and controlling abuse. Victims of abuse are supported well by independent advocates, who ensure their voices are heard. Senior leaders have considered the impact of the government's early release scheme (for offenders) and have worked closely with probation services to understand the risks for families living in the City.

6. Child and family assessments, including those for disabled children, are comprehensive and completed in a timely way. They include multi-agency views and ensure that individual, specific and unique needs are considered. Social workers' practice and recommendations are informed by children's and parents' voices and analysis of history, and management oversight is clearly articulated. Children receive appropriate and timely interventions, which improve their situations.
7. Disabled children have opportunities and activities secured by their social workers that they may not otherwise experience. Their parents are provided with short breaks from their caring responsibilities, through regular financial support and after-school and holiday activities. This support enables parents to continue to manage their children's care needs.
8. Children benefit from longstanding, trusting relationships with their social workers. Positive relationships are made through regular, purposeful visits. Social workers see children in different environments and undertake direct work using a variety of tools. They are skilled at engaging children in challenging discussions and do this sensitively and thoughtfully.
9. Child in need plans are well coordinated and children's circumstances are known and comprehensively recorded through reviews. Well-written plans help children and families understand decisions made about their lives. Social workers are sensitive to families' cultural and language needs, linking them with their relevant communities and places of worship, and using interpreters and translators to help them participate in important meetings and understand key documents.
10. Child protection enquiries are undertaken promptly. Investigations are detailed and risks are clearly identified. Children's circumstances are understood, and planning progresses to initial child protection conferences when needed, supporting multi-agency decisions that are meeting children's and families' needs. Safety planning during strategy meetings considers risks to make these children safer until plans are determined. Good multi-agency attendance at review conferences and core group meetings supports shared decision-making.
11. Most child protection plans are comprehensive, address identified needs and have clear actions and timescales. Workers develop plans with families, so that they are clear about the changes that need to be made. For a small number of children, child protection planning is less effective and children have been left experiencing abusive situations for too long with insufficient contingency planning.
12. An independent service is commissioned to complete return home interviews with children who go missing from home or care. Social workers follow up if children refuse to meet with the provider, to understand the reasons for a child being away from their home or placement. Workers use a risk assessment tool, which they regularly update when children's circumstances change, including

risk of exploitation and going missing. This generic tool does not always help workers to consider issues of criminal or sexual exploitation in enough detail to explore push-and-pull factors and fully reflect escalating or de-escalating risk of intrafamilial and extrafamilial harm.

13. Senior leaders know all the children who are subject to the public law outline (PLO), are in pre-proceedings or court proceedings or on supervision orders. Intervention for some children who are subject to the PLO is focused on meeting processes and not enough on their experiences while they remain at home. The PLO tracker is over-simplified and lacks the level of detail to support oversight of timescales and historic information.
14. The City of London commissions an emergency duty service from a neighbouring borough. Most of this work relates to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, and practice for this group is a strength.
15. There are effective arrangements in place to oversee and manage allegations against professionals. Work is completed in a timely way. The local authority designated officer (LADO) provides effective guidance, support and training to external agencies.
16. An education welfare officer ensures rigorous oversight of the welfare of children who are electively educated at home. There are currently no children missing education, although appropriate systems are in place should this situation change.
17. Children living in households where there is parental substance misuse are helped by an expert offer from substance misuse services. Practitioners use a trauma-informed approach to address adverse childhood experiences.

The experiences and progress of children in care: outstanding

18. Children who are in the care of the City of London receive an outstanding service that significantly improves their life experiences.
19. Most children coming into care are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Their arrival into care is a smooth transition dealt with efficiently by skilled social workers. A few citizen children who have had ongoing active social work involvement have experienced a less well-planned entry into care.
20. Once children do enter care, their permanence plans progress quickly, and social workers consider a range of options for their futures. Experienced senior managers have excellent technical knowledge and oversight of care planning for children. Leaders work closely with the social workers who know children best, to consider permanent options, including kinship care, special guardianship orders, long-term fostering and adoption. Children's plans are overseen and supported well through monthly permanency planning meetings.

21. Children live in stable homes, supporting their feelings of security and worth. Social workers develop plans with and for children, ensuring that children's plans reflect their unique needs and are comprehensive and purposeful. This increases children's emotional security and helps them to make progress.
22. Children's reviews are timely and involve the relevant people, including children if they wish to attend and their written views if they do not. An independent reviewing officer (IRO) provides consistency, following up on children's progress between reviews. The IRO writes warm and sensitive letters to children following their reviews, explaining how decisions were reached and the progress they have made in their lives. When the IRO is concerned about progress, discussions take place and, if necessary, matters are escalated with social workers and managers.
23. Social workers know their children very well and talk with warmth and extensive knowledge about them. Stable relationships with consistent social workers give children someone who they know and trust to share their worries and aspirations. Social workers visit children at a frequency determined by their needs. They undertake direct work with children and are strong and active advocates on their behalf. Visits to children capture the child's voice well. Social workers observe and note achievements and ensure that these are recorded and celebrated. Advocates and independent visitors are available for children if and when needed.
24. Social workers and carers encourage children to enjoy a range of sporting and leisure activities, providing them with fulfilling experiences that promote their social and emotional development.
25. Children are making good progress from their starting points. Careful consideration of children's wishes and feelings ensures well-planned arrangements for their transition into adulthood. This prevents children from worrying about the future.
26. Social workers, carers and health professionals work together to meet children's physical and emotional health needs very well. Children receive prompt health assessments and have direct access to emotional and mental health support from a wide range of services, including a systemic clinical team.
27. Social workers and carers have high aspirations for children and support them to attend school or college, to enjoy their education and to make progress. Children also have extensive support from the virtual school and their personal education plans provide an overall picture of what is going on in their lives, and how this impacts on education. School leaders are highly positive about the work of the virtual school. Children make good educational progress in line with their starting points.
28. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive excellent support from their social workers, who consider the impact of potential past trauma from

children's country of origin or, indeed, from their journey to the United Kingdom. Timely legal advice ensures that children's applications with the Home Office are pursued quickly. Workers help children access educational provision, to support their language development and integrate them with other children or young people. They are helped to engage in community and religious activities.

29. Where appropriate, social workers ensure that children remain in contact with family and friends. Social workers refer unaccompanied asylum-seeking children to the Red Cross and other agencies, for support to trace their families should they wish, helping to ensure they keep in touch if possible for their well-being. Social workers support children well and access interpreters to support communication with them.
30. Disabled children in care benefit from timely and appropriate support to meet their complex needs. Professionals work together, aligning children's plans with their education and healthcare plans. Children's needs and experiences are understood well by their social workers, who spend time with them and get to know them well. This is done at the children's pace and social workers are supported with training to gain the necessary skills to communicate with children. Children are supported to communicate through social stories, including as part of their reviews.
31. Transition planning for disabled children begins early, well before they reach adulthood. This reduces parents', carers' and children's anxieties about their futures.
32. Children in care do not experience disruption in their transition into 'leaving care', as they benefit from the consistency of their existing social worker, and often the existing support network remains in place.
33. Very few children in this unusually small local authority are fostered or require an adoptive placement. Commissioning arrangements make use of the London placement portal, and information is triangulated with checks and assessments, including from any LADO involvement, the host authority or Ofsted findings. Joint commissioning supports children's transitions well. Social workers' recommendations and assessments of placement quality inform decisions, allowing safe and suitable homes to be identified for children. Robust quality assurance processes are followed once placements are commissioned for children, with regular visits when children's views are sought.
34. City of London is part of a regional adoption agency (Ambitious for Adoption) and uses this when necessary to progress plans for adoption. This arrangement includes consultation about early permanence.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: outstanding

35. Care leavers are the largest cohort of children and young people the authority supports. Most are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people. Care leavers experience consistent, secure and stable relationships with workers, who talk about them with affection and care, and help them to make progress and achieve their ambitions. Social workers work jointly with young people to develop effective pathway plans that they can understand and that reflect their religious and cultural needs well.
36. Social workers are particularly sensitive to young people's emotional health and well-being. They quickly notice vulnerabilities and risks, and take action to support, advise and protect young people. They identify and assess risk of exploitation, and work in an authoritative but relational way, so that young people understand concerns and feel empowered.
37. Care leavers have access to a clear and comprehensive web-based local offer, which has been translated into a number of languages and sets out numerous benefits to help young people as they develop towards independent living. Senior leaders facilitate online monthly sessions to inform care leavers of their rights and entitlements. This is done in a helpful way, with the support of drug and alcohol, housing, and health services, raising awareness of resources and providing information about risk.
38. Social workers ensure that care leavers have identity documents, and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are supported to obtain a British passport when they achieve indefinite leave to remain. Care leavers are living in suitable homes, mostly in supported accommodation with effective support to learn independence skills and manage everyday living. 'Staying put' arrangements are considered where they are appropriate and it is what young people want. While many care leavers live outside of the area, they are given priority status for City of London housing and they are all offered a tenancy by the age of 25 years.
39. The virtual school is ambitious for care leavers, helping them to enrol onto courses, consider apprenticeships and explore employment options. Where there is a specific need, workers are creative in finding alternative means of communication, for example learning British sign language so that they can communicate with a young person.
40. Workers encourage and support young people to attend activities organised by the children in care council and many take up these opportunities, such as free access to the gym, football and cricket clubs. A four-night summer sailing residential opportunity was an enriching offer, which a number of care leavers enjoyed. Social workers often take care leavers out for coffee, sporting events or an occasional meal. Young people enjoy these activities, which help to build trusting relationships.

41. Care leavers who are parents have excellent support from workers who are attuned to parenting needs. When necessary, child protection processes are followed.
42. Social workers and managers know care leavers really well and adulthood is not seen as the end of the journey of support. Social workers keep in regular contact with young people, through visits, texts, emails and a variety of other communication. Social workers notice when young people's presentation changes and they are quick to take action to support them. The strong support offer is available for as long as young people need it. Social workers described occasions when care leavers return post 25 years with various matters and they continue to be supported.

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

43. The City of London is a Corporation with council functions. The Town Clerk (chief executive officer), the lead member, the Director of Children's Services (DCS) and the senior leadership team are strong champions for children and families' needs. The Corporation's work extends well beyond the square mile to benefit the whole of London, for example sponsoring 'Shining Stars' (Pan London celebration of virtual schools and educational achievement) and planning new mentorships for children and young people across the capital.
44. Corporate leaders and elected members are passionate about children's services and their responsibilities for children. The political setup of the City is unique, with strong connections that bring influence and support through resources. Links into the business community add to children's services' networks, enhancing opportunities for children. There is effective scrutiny and oversight by members.
45. The City shares its children's safeguarding partnership with a neighbouring borough. Partnership work is a strength, with partners understanding the unique needs of the City, for example through sharing learning, piloting tools and multi-agency audits. The board has regular representation from relevant agencies and has moved recently to include the City's director of education, strengthening the educational perspective.
46. Inspectors found an open learning and inclusive culture in the children's services, and, under the DCS's leadership, a nurturing, respectful and thoughtful approach. This is promoting the skills of the workforce to remain open to different perspectives.
47. Senior managers provide stable, effective leadership of the service. The Town Clerk rightly highlights confidence in them, seeing strength in their combined backgrounds and experience.

48. Regular meetings with the DCS and Assistant Director help to ensure that the Town Clerk and lead member have a direct line of sight to the most vulnerable children being helped and looked after by the City of London. The children's performance monitoring board supports effective governance and oversight of the key areas in children's social care.
49. An active children in care council meets regularly, led by a confident participation worker. This positive group enables young people to gain support from one another and share their views with their corporate parents. Their voices influence service delivery, as seen in the recent review of the Care Leaver offer. The sailing trip, which children described as amazing, the committee dinner, supper club for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and local apprenticeships show strong commitment and ambition across the Corporation for children and young people. The corporate parenting offer extends to all care leavers up to 25 years, with priority housing in the City and leaving care status now a protected characteristic. The City's engagement in the pan-London Care Leavers Compact group also supports consistency and quality of services for young people.
50. There is a strong learning culture within the Corporation. Although a small borough, leaders have made a point of being outward looking, linking with neighbouring boroughs closely, broadening views by looking across London and nationally in various areas, including safeguarding arrangements and tackling violence against women and girls.
51. A systemic model of practice is well embedded. Staff members, from social workers to senior leaders, have the opportunity to complete diplomas in systemic practice or systemic supervision and leadership. Leaders have moved purposefully from an improvement board to an achieving excellence board, reflecting their ambition to continue improving services. Wider learning from other authorities, peer reviews and independent audits are helping to keep services present and effective.
52. Leaders commission training flexibly as the workforce needs. Learning is promoted well, through training forums, team meetings, group supervision and a newly created SharePoint site that is giving greater access to learning for all.
53. Leaders gather a wide range of feedback about services for children and families and on staff well-being. This has helped to formulate and improve services for children, families and staff.
54. Links to universities, such as Goldsmiths University and South Bank University, provide opportunities for student social workers to attend practice placements in the City, and support the development of social work practice and supervision.
55. Leaders are reflective and open to learning and feedback. They have developed an accurate self-evaluation and were already aware of areas for improvement.

They welcomed open conversations through feedback, thinking about challenge and how services may be developed to improve.

56. A strong focus on anti-racist practice and on culture, religion and diversity is evident in children's records. Clinical therapy is offered to help staff who experience challenging issues, including racism.
57. Quality assurance and moderation processes are well developed. A commissioned independent agency has audited and moderated a large proportion of children's circumstances in the past six months, with plans to increase the number of practice reviews from September 2024.
58. Since the last inspection, management oversight on children's records has improved, with a strong supporting rationale for actions for most children. The understanding gained from audit is supporting reflective practice well, giving challenge and presenting learning opportunities.
59. The supervision of practice is consistently strong, with clear reflection and hypothesis in line with the model of practice, ensuring that actions are determined, reviewed and followed up vigorously.
60. Leaders recognise that the workforce is the City's main strength and asset. They are a strong and committed workforce who say they love working in the City. Social workers describe effective management oversight and an environment in which the leaders know all the children they are working with, and are available and approachable.
61. There is meaningful investment in the care and stability of the workforce. The City is not complacent about retention and recruitment of workers. Social workers enjoy manageable caseloads, generic working and strong peer support. They feel reassured that, if they are away from work for any reason, their colleagues know about their children and will provide an effective service in their absence.
62. The supportive work environment enables workers to undertake the direct practice they want, to support children and families. They know their children well and are a credit to the organisation. The stability in the workforce adds to children's security, as they have the opportunity to build up very trusting and positive relationships.



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