

London Borough of Hounslow

Inspection of children's social care services

Inspection dates: 1 October 2018 to 12 October 2018

Lead inspector: Tara Geere
Her Majesty's Inspector

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

Senior leaders, supported by strong corporate and cross-party political support, have worked effectively to improve services since the last inspection of children's social care services in 2014. A thoughtful and caring approach to working with children and their families is threaded through services for children in Hounslow, and staff morale is high.

Senior leaders know their services well. They have combined learning from previous inspections and peer reviews with their own monitoring arrangements to ensure that children receive timely and appropriate help to meet their individual needs. Consequently, services at the 'front door' have improved and children in care receive a good service. However, leaders are aware of the need to improve the consistency of services offered to children in need of help and protection and to care leavers. Well-targeted action plans, staff support and training are already being implemented, continuing to improve quality and outcomes for children.

Leaders took prompt and effective action earlier in the year to tackle the unprecedented demand on referral and assessment services that had affected performance, and they are building further capacity for the future.

What needs to improve

- The quality of plans for children in need, including children in need of protection and disabled children.

- The quality of case recording, with particular regard to: the management of allegations, 16- and 17-year-old homeless young people, private fostering arrangements and elective home education.

- The quality of recording of management oversight and supervision.

- Health information for care leavers.

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

1. An increasing number of children and families benefit from a wide range of good-quality early help provision in Hounslow. However, assessments and planning for children within early help services are not yet of a consistently good standard. This means that, for some children, provision is uncoordinated and does not address their needs effectively.
2. Senior leaders have recently undertaken a review of early help services and are developing a more coordinated model across the partnership. A newly established early-help strategy group has a clear focus and appropriate priorities to oversee the development of early help services. However, it is too early to see the impact for children.
3. The Hounslow 'front door' and the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) provide a timely and effective response to contacts by professionals and members of the public, to help to ensure that children's needs are met at the earliest opportunity. Thresholds, including those for early help interventions, are appropriate, although a small minority of cases showed some variability in the initial decisions applied. This means that a small number of children experienced delays in receiving the right support and help that they needed, although inspectors found that no children were left at risk of significant harm as a result of these delays.
4. When children's needs are more complex, or risks to their welfare increase, the majority receive an effective, timely response to ensure that risks are reduced. Senior leaders, supported by Hounslow Safeguarding Children Board, have worked effectively with partners to raise the awareness and understanding of thresholds. This is resulting in better quality referrals. The co-location of health and police partners in the MASH is adding value to decision-making on contacts and referrals, as decisions can be made quickly and more consistently. Senior leaders are in discussion with partners to further strengthen capacity and improve the timeliness of information-sharing.
5. Children receive appropriate support and interventions from the out-of-hours emergency duty team. There is clear, daily communication and handover to the MASH, to ensure an effective response to children and their families.
6. Timely strategy discussions take place when children's needs escalate. However, these do not always include relevant partner agencies. The large majority of strategy discussions seen by inspectors consisted of telephone conversations between police and children's social care. While workers endeavour to make contact and gather information from relevant partners, the absence of some partner agencies at strategy discussions, particularly health agencies, limits the ability of participants to consider family histories and to undertake effective

analysis of risk. Senior leaders are taking appropriate action to improve attendance.

7. The majority of child protection enquiries are timely and include multi-agency information-sharing that underpins appropriate decision-making. Inspectors saw a range of comprehensive assessments that were regularly updated. These assessments demonstrated a good balance of understanding and analysis, and were focused on parents' capacity to meet the needs of children. Workers make good use of chronologies and family history and show sensitive consideration of culture and ethnicity in their analysis, which results in a good understanding of individual children's needs.
8. Child in need and child protection plans require improvement to be consistently good. Most plans are not specific, measurable or time-limited, so it is difficult to assess progress. The vast majority of actions in the plans seen by inspectors are too general and timescales are rarely included. Consequently, these actions are not specific enough for parents to understand what they need to do differently or when to do it in order to improve outcomes for their children or to make them safer.
9. Social workers know their children well and show a good understanding of the individual plans for each child, seeking children's wishes and feelings during their timely visits. However, case recording does not always reflect the quality of the work being undertaken.
10. Inspectors found variability in the quality of supervision records, which do not always do justice to the quality of supervision reported by social workers. When supervision is recorded, it does not consistently show reflection, analysis or rigour to demonstrate that social workers have monitored children's progress against their plans.
11. The management of allegations and concerns about adults who work with children is timely and well considered. Actual and potential risks are identified well, with proportionate actions taken. However, senior leaders are aware of the need to better record the rationale for decisions when advice is sought by partner agencies in order to demonstrate how thresholds have been applied.
12. Clear and up-to-date records of children missing education enable agencies to work together effectively to undertake all reasonable checks to ascertain the whereabouts of children. Routine checks are carried out to ensure that all children leaving primary school start their secondary education. Children new to the borough are contacted promptly and a school place is secured. The number of children missing education decreased last year. This is a result of effective partnership work between the local authority and schools.
13. The number of children who are electively home educated has increased over the last two years; currently 176 children are being educated at home. Senior leaders

are aware that some families are opting for elective home education because they are dissatisfied with their child's school. The local authority has a clear policy on elective home education. However, practice is not sufficiently robust, as staff do not know what education, if any, is being provided for a small number of children, and consequently, whether there are any concerns about their welfare. The local authority is aware of the need to increase resources for this area of work and to improve information-sharing between the elective home education team, children's social care and the special educational needs team.

14. Young people aged 16 and 17 and who are at risk of homelessness benefit from timely, appropriate assessments of their needs, with the provision of supported accommodation when necessary. Consideration is given to young people being accommodated. However, this is insufficiently explored and records do not demonstrate that young people are making informed decisions about whether or not they become looked after. Once placed in supported accommodation, the quality of support that young people receive is variable. While some young people receive active support, the lack of a formal child in need plan, identifying clear actions and timescales, means that some young people do not receive the level of support that they need.
15. Leaders have worked hard to raise awareness of private fostering since the last inspection in 2014. This has resulted in a small increase in referrals, with five children in private fostering arrangements at the time of this inspection. However, following their recent review, leaders are aware of the need to improve the timeliness of assessments to ensure that appropriate support is put in place to meet children's needs.
16. The quality of practice for disabled children is not consistently good. In the stronger cases, case recording showed clearer planning, with specific actions to support improvements in outcomes for children. However, the local authority is aware, through its own quality assurance audits, of the need to ensure the consistency of review meetings to monitor, inform and update care plans to meet the needs of disabled children.
17. Services for children who are at risk of sexual exploitation or who go missing are robust and enable good access to return home interviews. Children are given the opportunity to talk to people who they know, or independent workers. This supports them to talk to trusted adults. Social workers visit children and talk about episodes of going missing in order to understand the risks that children may face. However, these visits are not consistently well recorded. This limits the ability to inform service delivery by analysing the reasons why children go missing and by gathering important intelligence and identifying patterns and trends. Senior leaders have already recognised the need to strengthen capacity and to improve recording on individual cases and the minutes of the multi-agency sexual exploitation panel in order to support better identification and to improve outcomes.

18. The local authority is managing their 'Prevent' duty effectively, with good-quality training, horizon scanning and direct work. The work is very well coordinated, and staff respond to the immediate needs of children as well as helping to identify and to reduce the risks of terrorism and extremism. The 'Prevent' lead and police partners offer good-quality support to staff, which helps them to navigate complex and high-profile cases. Lead officers have well-established links in the local community and an influential presence in the local authority, which helps to ensure that children are safeguarded.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers are good

19. The quality of services for children in care has improved since the inspection in 2014. Social workers and managers are highly aspirational for the children in their care and demonstrate a determination to improve children's experiences and outcomes. Full consideration is given to meeting children's needs, and children make good progress when they come into care.

20. A highly effective, comprehensive tracking system enables senior leaders to oversee and monitor the progress of and outcomes for children across a wide range of services, including children subject to proceedings and children who have plans for adoption or long-term fostering. Individual children's cases are regularly considered at the case monitoring board, and actions are identified to ensure the timely progress of children's plans.

21. Children in Hounslow are supported to remain in the care of their families if it is safe for them to do so. They benefit from a range of good-quality services that meet their individual needs. When children cannot remain with their families, timely, decisive action is taken for them to come into care.

22. When children come into care, they live in good-quality placements that meet their individual needs. Most children are matched well with their carers. Children experience a wide range of activities and opportunities that enable them to enjoy life and to make good progress. Local authority foster carers who spoke to inspectors commented positively on the good-quality support and training offered to them to support children in placement.

23. Children's placement stability is monitored closely by senior leaders. Supportive action is taken promptly when concerns are identified; this may include increased frequency of visits by social workers, therapeutic input or the provision of mentor support. This enables children to remain in their placements when appropriate.

24. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children benefit from highly effective multi-agency work. There is excellent consideration of their needs, leading to good-quality assessments and plans, and appropriate placements.

25. When children are placed at some distance from their home, effective notification work takes place to ensure that host authorities are informed. However, senior leaders are aware of the need to strengthen consultation with the host authorities before children are placed, as well the need to keep a record of these discussions.
26. Social workers know their children well. Children are visited regularly and they are seen alone so that their wishes and feelings can be ascertained. These are then taken into account in their care plans.
27. Children in care are given good support to become physically and emotionally healthier. Workers consider and assess individual needs effectively, informed by regularly completed strengths and difficulties questionnaires and screening in relation to sexual health and any potential or actual issues of substance misuse. Children are routinely taken to dental appointments and eye tests, to help to ensure that their health needs are met.
28. Consideration of health needs is not yet consistent for care leavers. Young people are not routinely informed of their health histories, and managers do not know how many young people have received health passports. The absence of health histories means that young people's understanding of their health needs is limited and they are not able to make informed decisions about their future healthcare.
29. The virtual college, managers and social workers have a clear focus on the progress and attainment of individual children. As a result, children in care, a high proportion of whom have special educational needs, make good progress against their individual targets. Children and young people are supported by a range of services; for example, engagement mentors tailor support for young people at Key Stage 4, to better develop young people's mathematical skills.
30. The achievements of children in care are celebrated well through an annual Kids in Care Awards event. Sensitive consideration is given to ensuring that all children, including children in secure accommodation and birth children of foster carers, can participate in or host the event.
31. Managers use a well-established, comprehensive system to pursue the most appropriate permanence options at an early stage for children in Hounslow. Adoption services have improved since the last inspection. Children are matched well and are placed with adopters more quickly than they were previously. Adopters and carers have access to a wide range of post-adoption and special guardianship support. Adopters who spoke to inspectors reported positively about the support and training available to them to meet the needs of their children.

32. Children in Hounslow benefit from good support from advocates, independent visitors, and 'grand mentors' (an inter-generational mentoring scheme to support care leavers), who support and help children to share their views and opinions.
33. Care plans are regularly monitored by independent reviewing officers (IROs) and reviews are timely. However, recent capacity issues within the IRO team have led to high caseloads. The local authority has recently recruited additional staff to address capacity and to strengthen care planning. However, it is too early to see the impact of these two appointments.
34. Care leavers receive timely support from dedicated personal advisers who know them well. However, the quality of pathway planning is not consistently good. From their own quality assurance audits, senior leaders are aware of the need to ensure that plans are updated if circumstances change. Similarly, it is not always evident on files that risk has been assessed for young people and that plans include specific actions with timescales.
35. The local authority is in touch with the vast majority of its care leavers. However, through their own performance monitoring, managers are aware of the need to ensure that case recording evidences the tenacious efforts made to re-engage young people in services.
36. There is an appropriate focus on helping young people to prepare for independence through the provision of support and training, such as budgeting. However, young people report that they would prefer to receive this training at an earlier stage.
37. The vast majority of care leavers live in suitable accommodation and benefit from good support to maintain their living arrangements. 'Staying-put' arrangements, for care leavers to remain living with their former foster carers beyond the age of 18, are readily available, across both local authority and independent fostering agency placements. Care leavers living within the borough are exempt from paying council tax, an initiative that was developed with full cross-party political support as part of the corporate parenting response to young people in order to help them to live independently.

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

38. The director of children's services, who is currently interim chief executive, the lead member and the senior leadership team know their services well. They have a comprehensive understanding of the strengths and areas for further development, underpinned by regular performance monitoring, quality assurance audits and a thorough and accurate self-assessment. A determination to improve outcomes for children and to create an open, learning culture have been central to these improvements.

39. All areas for improvement that inspectors identified during this inspection were known to senior leaders, with action plans already in place. Learning and recommendations from previous peer reviews and inspections have been implemented. These include acting on the recommendations from the children's services inspection in 2014 and strengthening services at the 'front door' following the joint targeted area inspection in 2017. Senior managers have also recently commissioned a review of early help services. Capacity issues at the 'front door' in the summer of 2018, including an unprecedented increase in referrals, were addressed rapidly by the commissioning of an additional external team of social workers. The impact of this was closely monitored by senior leaders and the Hounslow Safeguarding Children Board.
40. Senior leaders have developed mature relationships with partner agencies, supported by robust oversight from the Hounslow Safeguarding Children Board and its sub-groups. The local judiciary, the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service and a wide range of partners, including headteachers, police and health colleagues, all commented positively on the improvements that had been made to further safeguard children in Hounslow.
41. Strong, cross-party political and corporate support for children's services is focused on prioritising the needs of children. This is overseen by a range of appropriate governance arrangements and effective scrutiny of service provision. As part of wider service improvement, leaders have focused on developing services for children in need of help and protection, including highly effective systems to oversee and monitor the progress of children, such as those in both private and public proceedings, children on child protection plans for more than two years and children subject to repeat plans. This is ensuring that work with children and families is timely and that intervention is increasingly well targeted.
42. Senior leaders use a comprehensive quality assurance framework, multi-agency auditing and internal and external reviews to target resources effectively to areas that require development. This is supported by a wide-ranging training offer for staff. The appointments of a child in need reviewing officer and practice development champions have resulted in palpable improvements. Examples include targeted work around the use of case summaries and chronologies. Further work to improve the quality of plans, to ensure that they include clear and measurable actions, and to improve the quality of supervision records, is planned for later in the year.
43. The children's information recording system is being developed further to include live dashboards, and these will be available later this year. These changes have been introduced to further strengthen leaders' understanding of performance and practice for children and their families.
44. Corporate parenting arrangements are strong and have improved significantly since the inspection in 2014. These arrangements are supported by good cross-

party political involvement and regular input from young people, and they are having a positive impact on service development. Recent examples include the provision of council tax exemptions for care leavers and foster carers.

45. Senior leaders have worked purposefully to build a stable workforce and enable staff development. The majority of staff told inspectors that their caseloads are manageable. Social workers' morale is high. They have access to good training and management support and enjoy working in Hounslow.



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