

3 June 2025

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Dear Mr Ghoshal

Focused visit to Lewisham children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Lewisham children's services on 30 April and 1 May 2025. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Claire Beckingham and Monique Lindsay.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need or subject to a protection plan. The primary focus included the impact of family group decision-making meetings and other interventions for children on the edge of care or subject to a letter before proceedings.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Headline findings

Since the last inspection in 2023, when the experiences and progress of children who need help and protection were judged to be good, leaders have sustained and, in some areas, strengthened practice.

Lewisham has been selected by the Department for Education to help develop and test national reforms as a Families First for Children pathfinder authority. At the time of the visit, services were undergoing significant transformation, as leaders and partner agencies are implementing a new structure which they have piloted, designed and tested through the pathfinder journey.

With high aspirations and a steadfast emphasis on doing the right thing for children and families, senior leaders are implementing plans to further develop and strengthen services. Inspectors did not find any areas for improvement that leaders were not already aware of and were not already addressing through detailed action plans and quality assurance activity. In the context of service redesign and systems in transition, inspectors found that services for children remain remarkably consistent, and practice overall is strong across teams and pathways.

The needs of children and families subject to child-in-need or child protection plans are understood well, and most children's circumstances are improving because of the carefully planned work being undertaken on their behalf. Action by leaders before this visit has improved the timeliness of statutory child protection processes, which had slipped for a minority of children. Pre-proceedings arrangements are mostly effective and are on an improving trajectory. Family group decision-making runs through the core of services for children. Joint working, both with families and partner agencies, is well developed, and children benefit from this joined-up approach with positive outcomes.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?

- The timeliness of pre-proceedings Public Law Outline (PLO) family meetings taking place following the decision to enter the PLO process.

Main findings

Children in Lewisham experience warm, trusting relationships with practitioners who know them well. Workers write poignant records, full of care, kindness and comfort for the children they support. Children and family assessments are detailed and carefully balanced. There is an appropriate focus on risks and family strengths are also recognised. The response to risk is proportionate. Workers seek the views of other professionals in the child's network and are curious in exploring other agencies' assessment of risk and need. Practitioners and managers understand the nuances of disadvantage and seek to address racism, poverty and inequality for the families they work with. Male partners and fathers are visible and included in work with families and in the ongoing process of assessment. Work is consistently informed by families' history, culture and diversity. Workers understand how these factors may increase children's vulnerability or create more opportunities to support children.

Across services, practitioners and managers are confident in managing risk. They are not afraid to try different approaches, or to change their minds. Children and their families benefit from this flexibility. Newly formed multi-agency child protection teams are, when appropriate, diverting children from child protection plans, through balanced assessment and careful consideration when risks could and should be reduced in a different way.

Work for children in need is well considered. Practitioners give careful thought about what is needed to support children and to prevent escalation of need. When there is little progression, sensible decisions are made to escalate and consider risk at an initial child protection conference.

Practitioners demonstrate very effective skills in their analysis and response to domestic abuse. Workers have a well-articulated understanding of children as victims rather than as witnesses of domestic abuse. Language is powerful in records and, alongside targeted work, it is helping to change perpetrators' behaviour. This enables some children to resume safe relationships with parents.

Practitioners' understanding of extra-familial harm and the nuanced nature of harm in this sphere is evident, as is their confidence in doing things better for children.

Some children experience minor delays in child protection processes and in statutory timescales being met. Most children's records reflect meaningful management oversight of these issues. Leaders and managers understand what is happening for individual children behind the data. Leaders recognise the potential for vulnerability. They have been focusing on these areas and performance indicators are showing improvements.

Across the service, children's plans are strong. Plans are regularly reviewed internally and by all relevant partner agencies and family members. Consequently, most children's circumstances are measurably improving. Decisions to move to pre-proceedings are made quickly when children's circumstances are not progressing under child protection plans. Some children have been waiting too long for the process to start following a decision to enter the PLO and while leaders have recognised the need for action, plans to address this aspect of the process are in their infancy. Action by leaders has successfully strengthened tracking and oversight for children once they are in the pre-proceedings phase of the PLO, with families moving more quickly through the process and children making more demonstrable progress.

Bespoke, well-targeted family help and edge of care work is helping to stabilise children in their family networks, making the need for care less likely and supporting children's successful reunification with their parents.

Recorded supervision mostly demonstrates purposeful direction to practitioners, although the frequency of recorded supervision is variable. While this is an area for development, practitioners told inspectors that they are well supported and happy in Lewisham. They have managers and leaders who are available and approachable, and they feel listened to. Managers advocate well for staff and help them to grow and develop professionally.

Senior leaders have developed a comprehensive quality assurance framework that helps them to understand children's experiences. Performance analysis is translated into clear, effective plans for improvement. Leaders are bold in naming areas for greater focus and improvement. Leaders know themselves well. Their self-evaluation of practice is impressively accurate.

Senior leaders have developed strong multi-agency partnerships, reinforced by mature relationships and healthy challenge. Consultation and co-production are evident with families, partner agencies and staff. Practitioners in Lewisham are positive about the reforms and are resilient in embedding the changes. There is a strong sense that these changes will benefit families and improve children's experiences. Working alongside families is engrained within practice in Lewisham. The Families First for Children pathfinder programme fits well with the ethos that the authority has fostered. Relational practice shines through at all levels, with a tangible

commitment to helping families, and a belief that 'with the right support children will thrive within their families.'

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning the next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Claire Beckingham
His Majesty's Inspector