

Inspection of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 11 to 15 November 2024

Lead inspector: Nick Bennison, 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	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of children in care	Good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding

Children living or arriving in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea continue to receive excellent services that make a significant difference to their lives. Strong political and partnership support has enabled the senior leadership team to be an effective champion for children, young people and their families. Leaders listen to children, families and the workforce, as well as using a range of comprehensive quality assurance and performance activities to ensure that they have a realistic understanding of the quality and impact of services they provide. The local authority has invested in services and implemented a coherent strategy to help children at the earliest opportunity, reducing the need for more intensive support.

Children are protected by partnership arrangements that have strengthened since the last inspection. Children and families benefit from a relationship-based, systemic practice model. Social workers are curious, skilled and experienced, and deliver comprehensive assessments and interventions, helping to improve children's lives. In a small number of cases, supervision is not consistently supporting social workers to progress children's plans. A small number of children in care experience delays in identification of a permanent placement for them.

What needs to improve?

- The timeliness of permanence planning for the few children for whom there is delay.
- How consistently all social workers receive good quality supervision that supports them to progress plans that achieve progress for children.

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

1. Children and families in Kensington and Chelsea receive the right help at the right time. They benefit from an exceptionally wide range of early help services. Skilled workers undertake comprehensive assessments that support planning to improve children's circumstances. When risk levels change, workers ensure that children step up to or down from statutory services at the right time. Systemic clinicians based in the early help teams support children and families through effective direct work focusing on parenting skills, which continues even if children move between services. This creates a high-quality, seamless service that enables staff to develop consistent relationships with children and their families.
2. Children in need of help and protection receive a highly effective service that is both timely and responsive to their level of need. In both the multi-agency safeguarding hub and the locality teams, thresholds for intervention are applied appropriately, with a quick response to any referrals about children who may be in need or at risk of harm. Parental consent is well understood by social workers and consistently sought or dispensed with as appropriate. Social workers in locality teams are allocated to children at the initial point of contact and work with them until need is met or risk reduced.
3. When children need help outside office hours, the tri-borough emergency duty service, jointly run with two neighbouring boroughs, ensures that most children receive a timely response that meets their needs, with effective management oversight of work undertaken. Information is shared promptly with daytime services, ensuring a coordinated approach to children's needs.
4. Statutory assessments for children, including disabled children, are of high quality. Social workers explore current circumstances, family history and partner agency views. Children are regularly visited, and the use of direct work means that, in assessments, their voice is identified and understood. This ensures that social workers gain a full understanding of children's worlds.
5. When concerns escalate for children, child protection strategy meetings are held promptly and include relevant partner agencies to consider the next steps. Actions are clear and include comprehensive safety planning if required, pending further decision-making. Meetings are thorough and management oversight provides reflection and analysis, which supports practitioners. Child protection enquiries are timely and provide a clear rationale for any next steps,

with a comprehensive analysis of any risks, including vulnerability to exploitation.

6. Children are seen regularly by their social workers and their views are actively sought through purposeful direct work. This includes creative examples of interaction, observation and play to build positive relationships. Child-in-need and child protection plans are comprehensive and provide for timely contingency planning. Plans are regularly reviewed through well-attended multi-agency meetings, resulting in children's plans being progressed to improve their circumstances.
7. Domestic abuse is appropriately recognised and responded to, with a focus on all children in the family. Thoughtful risk assessments are conducted at the point of referral, and children who are experiencing domestic abuse have plans which positively impact on their well-being. A range of interventions for parents experiencing domestic abuse help them to understand the impact and risks for children and facilitate change in parental behaviour. This helps to ensure that children are safeguarded. Specialist domestic violence hub workers consult and support victims of domestic abuse, bringing additional skills and expertise. Social workers are sensitive to situations where making contact could increase risk and are careful to check with other agencies and victims regarding the safest form of contact.
8. When concerns increase for children, or there is a lack of engagement from parents, children are appropriately escalated into the pre-proceedings phase of the Public Law Outline. Sensitively written letters clearly set out areas of concern and the actions that parents need to take to address the concerns. Pre-proceedings meetings are held in a timely manner, with effective management oversight. The children's circumstances are regularly reviewed. This means that their assessment and plans are productively progressed to either reduce risk or for the local authority to make timely applications to court to protect children.
9. There is a very strong strategic and operational response to children who go missing from care or are at risk of exploitation. A detailed risk assessment tool is used and remains 'live' for any child who shows any emerging signs of being at risk of sexual, criminal or community exploitation. The impressive practice of those working with exploited children and young people is reducing risk to children at an early stage. Experienced practitioners adapt their work to meet emerging need. Skilled, enthusiastic and experienced workers offer a range of interventions through the targeted prevention team and detached outreach team, including specific education and employment support. Decisive interventions have had a positive impact on reducing risk for the vast majority of children.
10. Children living in private fostering arrangements receive comprehensive and timely assessments. These help to ensure that children are safe and that their needs are being well met. Awareness-raising work with schools and health

providers ensures that children placed in private fostering arrangements are promptly identified and responded to.

11. Children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless are made aware of their rights and entitlements. They are offered advocacy and an assessment is made of their need to be accommodated. This ensures that they can make informed decisions and, if needed, be quickly accommodated. Children's safety, emotional well-being and their aspirations are well considered.
12. Disabled children are exceptionally well supported by social workers, who invest time in identifying how best to communicate with them. Children with high levels of need have effective support packages that are sensitively tailored to their needs and those of their family.
13. When there are safeguarding concerns about professionals, the local authority designated officer (LADO) response is timely and appropriate. The LADO systems ensure that investigations are thoroughly tracked and quickly progressed.
14. Social workers and early help workers have an excellent knowledge of the needs of young carers. Children are being identified via child and family or early help assessments, and they are offered access to purposeful direct work and a range of young carer activities.
15. The local authority ensures that they respond to children missing education promptly. The statutory school attendance manager works closely with staff from key partner agencies, including professionals from the school, to respond to children who have poor attendance, including children in need. Any safeguarding concerns are quickly identified and responded to.
16. There are well-established systems in place to oversee the arrangements for elective home education. Timely action is taken if there are any safeguarding concerns. The team provides helpful advice to parents, including guidance relating to safeguarding, such as online safety awareness.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

17. Experienced and committed social workers know their children well and talk about them in a caring and nurturing way. Social workers have often known children for many years. They are tenacious advocates for their children, striving to seek the best outcomes for them.
18. Children are appropriately brought into care when it is clear that their safety cannot be assured within their families. Extensive options to support children in their family homes are thoroughly explored, and support is provided to enable children to remain with their birth families or extended family networks if it is safe to do so. When children are unable to safely remain with their families, the

local authority issues timely care applications. Permanence planning is initiated immediately for most children, including the potential for return to their birth families.

19. Children are matched appropriately to placements which meet their needs, including with extended family members or special guardians, allowing children to remain safely with carers who are important to them. However, permanence for a small number of children is not being considered quickly enough when they come into care.
20. Children's plans are regularly updated, based on regular reassessments of need. Meetings to review children's plans are timely and well attended. The reviews result in clear actions and timescales for social workers to progress children's care plans. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) write skilfully crafted letters to children, detailing why decisions were taken and identifying the progress that they have made. However, the process for IRO oversight of children's plans between reviews, to ensure they are being progressed, is inconsistent for a small number of children.
21. There is strong oversight of children in care who go missing, with regular reviews of risk at a monthly multi-agency forum. Agencies offer a range of effective resources focused on helping to prevent children from going missing from care. Return home interviews take place consistently, and while most contain a timely analysis of risk, there is some variability. For some children, the interview does not result in a sufficiently clear understanding of factors which led to them going missing.
22. Children in care have their physical and emotional health needs met effectively. Their physical health needs are regularly reviewed, and health reports are very well considered, ensuring that children have purposeful healthcare plans. Children are routinely registered with GPs, dentists and opticians and have regular check-ups. The looked-after children's nurses have effective links with the social work teams to ensure that children's health needs are prioritised and met.
23. Children in care with emotional well-being needs receive good support. Clinicians in the teams provide on-site consultation to practitioners and work directly with children to support their emotional needs. The clinicians also provide effective support to foster carers to strengthen relationships to help prevent any placement breakdowns.
24. Children are promptly supported by social workers to remain in school when they are at risk of suspension or exclusion. If children are placed at a distance from the borough, the virtual school offers effective support in helping to identify appropriate school placements.

25. The enthusiastic and ambitious staff in the virtual school work well with schools and other education providers to provide children in care with the best education opportunities. They also help children to benefit from other meaningful activities and enrichment. Some opportunities have been life-changing for young people, such as trips to Gambia and Brazil. The oversight and quality of personal educational plans is a particular strength. They encourage children and young people to take an active role in sharing their views.
26. The number of children in care sitting national tests and examinations is small, particularly in primary schools. Older children, despite the challenges that some face, make considerable progress in their knowledge and learning from their starting points when coming into care.
27. The virtual school provides exemplary support to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. This makes their transition to life in the UK as smooth as possible. The virtual school and partner agencies give them support, advice and guidance to make career choices, and provide practical support when needed, to give them the best chance of succeeding.
28. Children are supported well to get involved in a range of activities they enjoy, such as football and boxing, and, for younger children, age-appropriate activities such as playing with toys and drawing. These activities develop skills that aid the development of confidence in children.
29. Children receive excellent support to stay in touch with important people in their lives, including brothers and sisters who live with other carers or family members. Foster carers, residential workers and social workers facilitate positive contact for children and use this to support children's understanding of their identity. Social workers quickly identify the family network surrounding the child and systemic clinicians carry out skilled work with children and their parents, to support the creation of a positive relationship between them.
30. Children are living in homes where their needs are being met. Some children are placed out of the borough when there is no available placement in the borough that matches their needs, or due to their assessed need for a specialist placement. In such circumstances, social workers maintain regular contact and build positive relationships with children and their carers to ensure that their all-round needs are met. There are no children currently living in unregistered children's homes. On the very rare occasions such placements are used, the arrangements for oversight of these children are robust and child centred.
31. There is a limited range of appropriate placement options for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in the borough, but workers seek to find appropriate placements that meet their cultural needs when possible. This means that most children live in placements that meet their cultural, religious, care and educational needs.

32. Children's later-in-life letters and life-story work are sensitively written, using child-focused, colourful and creative ways to explain their story. Complex histories are clearly explained, and they capture details about birth parents, what they were like, how much they loved their children, and the reasons why children were unable to remain in their parents' care. For older children placed in long-term foster care, the letters and life-story work are not as consistently child-friendly.
33. A stable fostering workforce has enabled positive and trusting relationships to develop between foster carers and social workers. Foster carers benefit from regular visits from their supervising social workers. Most foster carers receive timely guidance and support that help them to respond to children's needs effectively. Equally, foster carers and their social workers receive high-quality training that features systemic practice and the use of virtual reality to simulate caring for and working with children and young people. This provides them with a greater understanding of the care that is needed to meet children's complex needs. However, case records do not always show how the impact of advice, guidance and support results in high-quality care for children.
34. Adoption practice is a strength. Collaborative working with the regional adoption agency (Coram Ambitious for Adoption) is well established and effective in its arrangements to achieve adoption for children. Senior managers are committed to learning about adoption-related matters at local and national level that continually improve practice, including decision-making processes. In addition, this collaborative approach ensures that children and adopters receive seamless support that is specific and timely throughout the adoption process and beyond the adoption order. There have been no adoption breakdowns in the past year.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: outstanding

35. Care leavers receive an exemplary level of support from highly skilled workers. They enjoy positive, trusting and stable relationships with practitioners who know them exceptionally well. This is enhanced by social workers continuing to work with care leavers up until and beyond their 21st birthday. Care leavers aged 21 or over continue to receive relevant support that is responsive to their needs. Visits to care leavers are at a frequency consistent with their levels of need and are well recorded, providing evidence of compassionate, focused conversations.
36. Workers are excellent advocates for care leavers and ensure that they understand their rights and entitlements. They are ambitious for them and celebrate their achievements with them. Care leavers are well supported to maintain relationships with the people who are important to them.

37. Pathway plans are co-produced with care leavers and are detailed, personalised and ambitious. They include full consideration of the care leaver's identity, ethnicity and religious and cultural heritage, as well as neurodiversity and other characteristics. They provide information about care leavers' views and their short- and longer-term goals. Plans provide a realistic analysis of risk, and the level of support and resources required are kept up to date. Care leavers are supported by staff who know them well. Sometimes, staff have supported care leavers over several years, to make progress towards living fully independently at a pace that is right for them.
38. Care leavers are positively encouraged by their social workers to be healthy and to take responsibility for their physical and mental health needs. Health needs are considered well in pathway plans. Care leavers are well supported to register with a GP, dentist and optician, and personal advisers (PAs) often accompany them to appointments. Care leavers' emotional health needs are addressed effectively through therapeutic support from systemic clinicians based in the locality teams. When care leavers experience mental health difficulties, practitioners make sure that there is effective multi-agency planning to ensure a swift and appropriate response to their needs.
39. The local offer is ambitious and clear and has been co-produced with care leavers. It sets out well all the entitlements and additional discretionary support that is available. Care leavers are aware of the local offer and all their entitlements. They are quickly helped to obtain the relevant documents that they will need in life, such as passports and provisional driving licences.
40. Most care leavers live in suitable accommodation that meets their needs through a number of accommodation pathways. Care leavers are well supported towards acquiring independence skills to help them to navigate the opportunities and challenges of adult life. Plans clearly identify actions designed to help promote independence in a timely manner, enhanced by the Skills for Life course. On completing the course, care leavers are given priority to bid for a home with a secure tenancy through the housing department. Most of these homes are fully decorated, carpeted and individualised.
41. When there are concerns about the safety of care leavers, their vulnerability is recognised and appropriate safety plans are promptly put in place. These help to identify and mitigate the risks that they face.
42. Care leavers who are parents are supported by PAs, who build strong relationships with them and their children. Effective joint working between PAs and universal services is helping to ensure that care leavers' individual needs are being met at the same time as being supported to develop the skills to become successful parents.
43. Care leavers who were formerly unaccompanied asylum seeking children are well supported by their PAs, who visit them in accordance with their needs. PAs

keep plans up to date and provide timely and helpful support. When formulating plans, they consider the impact of the care leavers' journeys into the UK and associated trauma, and their unique characteristics and needs. The plans are translated into the young person's preferred language to help to facilitate their understanding and engagement.

44. Care leavers in custody are well supported by PAs, who consider and plan for their release. This is enhanced through collaborative liaison with probation services. Care leavers receive financial support while in custody and are visited frequently by practitioners. This ensures that there can be a seamless transition back into the community on their release.
45. Care leavers are engaged in an exceptionally wide variety of clubs and groups where they can access support from professionals and establish supportive relationships with each other. These opportunities are highly valued by care leavers. The groups enable care leavers to be involved in the training and interviewing of staff, as well as in the proactive design of their services and the development of the local offer. They are supported by the local authority in having once-in-a-lifetime experiences, such as group trips to Zambia and Mexico.
46. Care leavers are strongly supported to continue in education or to obtain employment. They have easy access to the virtual school, which provides expert academic career advice and additional support. Those care leavers who are seeking employment are actively supported to apply for apprenticeships, both inside and outside the borough. Care leavers are encouraged to gain work experience through summer holiday workshops. They are involved in interviews of staff, which helps them prepare for their own interviews and enhances their sense of involvement in the service.

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

47. Leaders and managers continue to be exceptional champions for children, both within the borough and in the wider London area. The leader of the council and the lead member have the political and portfolio experience to build committed support among political colleagues for children's services and the knowledge and ability to hold the senior officers to account.
48. Senior leaders are energetic advocates for children, both inside and outside the local authority. Children's services and the relational, systemic, approach the department champions are viewed as key components in supporting the development of the corporate vision for the borough. Leaders have an accurate understanding of the areas of strength and of the further developments needed in children's services. They make good use of both formal reporting and links with community groups to gain a wide understanding of the quality and impact of services across the borough.

49. This commitment to children's services is underpinned by financial investment by the borough that has both strengthened and widened services. This has underpinned the development of a comprehensive early help offer and increased capacity in the virtual school and youth services. Early help workers are now embedded in schools, enabling an earlier point of intervention for children and their families. This means that the virtual school is better able to support children and young people, both in and outside the borough, with their educational progress. This investment has also meant that the local authority are now able to offer a greater package of youth support, which has resulted in the reduction of risks to young people in the borough from criminal exploitation.
50. The dynamic senior leadership team knows their service well. Their self-evaluation is accurate in its assessment of the areas of both strength and challenge across the service. Leaders receive regular, comprehensive data and practice reports that are formally reviewed with managers across the service. There is constant dialogue between senior leaders and members of staff, and with children and their parents, which deepens their understanding of the quality and impact of practice. This has led to strong service provision for children across the borough, although there is more work to be done to ensure consistency of planning for children in care.
51. The understanding and responsiveness of senior leaders to the changing needs of the child population have meant that the needs of children in the borough are met. There has been a significant increase in the number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in the borough, and these children receive a strong offer of support. The development of specialist teams, such as the targeted support teams, and the continuing work of the systemic clinicians in locality teams across the service illustrate the creativity of leaders in planning to ensure that the needs of vulnerable children across the borough are met.
52. The relationships with key partner agencies are both mature and impressive. There is an understanding at all levels of the senior team of how important it is to nurture and protect these relationships, particularly in the context of wider organisational change. Partner agencies view the local authority as child-focused and very proactive in meeting children's changing needs. These relationships have enabled the service to be forward thinking and to be involved in national developments, such as the family justice 'trailblazer' pilot scheme, which is aimed at tackling delay in the family justice system.
53. The voices of the child, parents and partner agencies are central to the development of children's services. There is an active Children in Care Council and Care Leavers Group. Children have been consulted in developing wider strategic plans, such as the bi-borough children and young people's plan. Care leavers have also been very actively involved in co-producing and reviewing the care leaver offer. Care leavers' participation is embedded in staff interviews and

training at all levels, as well as giving them opportunities for foreign travel. Foster carers have been involved in co-producing the standards of care policy. This has led to these children and young people feeling involved and valued by the local authority.

54. The corporate parenting board exercises strong oversight of the work with children in care and care leavers. Children and care leavers are actively involved; they report to the board on specific topics and are involved in task and finish groups.
55. There is an exemplary learning culture in Kensington and Chelsea. The relational, systemic practice model is deeply embedded across the whole service. This has supported the development of a culture of reflection and learning. The excellent quality assurance work strengthens this culture through the involvement of practitioners in the process. Most are involved in reflective conversations about their work. Equally, the involvement of children, parents and agencies in the process and the overall high quality of audits ensure that social workers and their managers understand the strengths and areas for development in their practice. The quality assurance framework ensures that wider learning is captured and reviewed at key points in the organisation, including by the chief executive and lead member. This means that leaders and managers at all levels understand the quality of service delivery, its impact and any areas that need to be strengthened.
56. The training offered in Kensington and Chelsea is extensive and of high quality, and workers are well supported to access the opportunities provided. There is a clear and robust offer of training and oversight for social workers in their assessed and supported year in employment, which allows them to learn incrementally.
57. The quality of supervision and management oversight is not consistently strong across services in order to ensure that workers are supported in progressing interventions and plans for children.
58. The workforce strategy has enabled the development of a workforce that is stable, highly trained, skilled and largely permanent. The caseloads and the structure of the service allow workers to establish long-term, impactful relationships with children and their families. This work is supported by high-quality training which social workers have been able to use effectively in their work with children. Staff feel highly valued by their managers, who they describe as visible, supportive and engendering a positive working culture. Staff are proud to work in the borough.

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