

Inspection of Barking and Dagenham children's services

Inspection dates: 10 to 21 July 2023

Lead inspector: Naintara Khosla, His Majesty's Inspector

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

There have been improvements since the previous inspection of the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham children's services in 2019, although overall services still require improvement to be good. Children's leaders have an understanding of service strengths and weaknesses. They have instigated and invested in a number of innovations. They have taken action to increase social work capacity, to help manage demand and give workers more time for direct support for children and families. They have addressed some of the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection, including engagement from the multi-agency partnership, responses to episodes of going missing from care and planning for children placed with their parents under a care order. They have continued to build effective support for children at risk of extra-familial harm and for care leavers.

However, progress is not consistent nor equitable for some children living in the borough. This has prevented the authority from achieving a judgement of good at this inspection. In particular, the pressures on management capacity, which were identified at the last inspection, continue to hinder the oversight and supervision needed to support effective frontline practice. This is evident in a lack of decisive intervention for some children who are exposed to long-term neglect and domestic

abuse, and in delays in progressing permanence plans and life-story work for some children in care.

What needs to improve?

- Timeliness of strategy meetings.
- The capacity, quality, consistency and impact of supervision and management oversight.
- Assessment and decision-making for children experiencing neglect.
- Timeliness of pre-proceedings pathways.
- Consistency of response to 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless.
- Oversight of children's placements in unregistered children's homes.
- Application of threshold in early help.
- Life-story work and permanency planning.

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

1. Children and families have access to a good range of universal and targeted early help provision. Early help workers complete assessments and plans that are of good quality, so there is effective support for children. Plans are informed by direct work undertaken with children and multi-agency information. Management oversight helps to progress support plans for children and their families. Intervention is timely. Children's services leaders have attracted corporate funding to support an ambitious and updated early help strategy, which will involve delivery through new 'family hubs', but it is too soon to evaluate its impact.
2. Experienced and skilled social workers in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) operate a consultation line for professionals, members of the public and children. Relevant information and advice aid decision-making and support the timely transfer of most children's contacts and referrals to services. This ensures that most children and families get the right level of help at the right time. Significantly, for a small number of children, thresholds in early help are inconsistently applied, so that families do not receive help that is reflective of their needs when stepped down from MASH.
3. The MASH engages quickly with families and ensures that parental consent and shared multi-agency information are in place. MASH triage is mostly efficient and timely. When a more urgent response is required, managers appropriately pass information directly to the assessment and intervention service for strategy discussions to be held.
4. Individual staff in the MASH categorise and grade risk using ratings which are not in line with the local authority's threshold documentation. For a small

number of children, this results in responses that are insufficiently focused on their experiences and circumstances.

5. Leaders have increased capacity in the MASH, including additional health and education resources. This helps to ensure timely information-gathering, to inform decisions about children's welfare. Therefore, health information informs and adds to the assessment of children's needs. Education staff have also recently been recruited to the MASH, although it is too soon to evaluate the impact of this change.
6. The emergency duty service (EDS) provides a timely, proportionate and consistent response to children's needs out of hours. When there are significant concerns for children, EDS holds strategy meetings with the police, to ensure immediate action to safeguard children.
7. Strategy meetings in the assessment teams are not always held in a timescale that is consistent with identified risks to children. Senior leaders have challenged partners to address the need for more timely police attendance at strategy meetings, and for health colleagues to ensure access to specialist sexual abuse medicals.
8. Actions agreed in strategy meetings are not always reviewed. Action is taken for immediate protection, but for some children there are missed opportunities to follow up on their wider needs. Stronger practice is evident in strategy meetings held in the contextual safeguarding team. Here, timely meetings, with good attendance by police and other multi-agency partners, result in clear actions to progress safety plans which reduce risk for children.
9. The introduction of a dedicated pre-birth team has provided much-needed additionality in the service. Assessments undertaken are mostly of good quality. They incorporate risk, evaluate need and secure early decision-making for children, who benefit from effective and timely care planning.
10. Most children's assessments, including those for disabled children, are comprehensive, include multi-agency views and are informed by history. Consequently, for most children, this results in timely, appropriate decisions being made for them and their families. Assessments include information written to the child following direct work. This helps practitioners to get a clear picture of children's development and presenting risks. Social workers and family support workers have specialist training in Makaton, the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) and in understanding autistic spectrum disorder. This supports communication with disabled children and a good understanding of their needs. When needed, safeguarding concerns are reduced through child-in-need or child protection plans.
11. In most children's cases, including for disabled children, core groups and child-in-need meetings are attended by relevant agencies and lead to planning and

interventions which are focused on need and help to reduce risks and harm to children.

12. However, the quality of child-in-need and child protection plans is variable. The range of interventions they involve, regularity of review and their impact for children are inconsistent. For a small number of children, intervention is over-optimistic and does not take account sufficiently of historical concerns to inform future and contingency planning. Specifically, there is insufficient recognition or measurable, evaluated social work intervention for children experiencing long-term neglect and/or domestic abuse. As a result, a small number of these children experience repeated periods of child-in-need or child protection plans without decisive intervention, or sustainable change being achieved. Where this is the case, they remain in circumstances that are harmful for too long.
13. There is a strong multi-agency approach to contextual safeguarding for children, whether they live at home or are in care. Information from partners adds to an understanding of locality 'hot spots' and community risks. Schools respond quickly to ensure that appropriate education is in place, so that exploitation risks for children are reduced. Careful collation of information and accurate risk analysis guide planned disruption work, which supports the safety of children who are experiencing exploitation or are on the periphery of serious youth violence.
14. When children go missing, timely strategy meetings result in comprehensive multi-agency risk assessment and safety planning. Practitioners keep the wider network around children informed so that the activities, movements and risks to children are acted on. Intervention benefits individual children and provides opportunities to reduce community risks.
15. Return home interviews are offered routinely when children have been missing. These interviews seek to find out where children have been and any associated risks. This information informs risk and 'grab pack' assessments which are shared with police and carers, with information shared across and between boroughs where necessary. This helps professionals to understand children's networks and contexts, and to reduce risk of harm.
16. Assessments and visiting for children in private fostering arrangements provide assurance about their care. However, advertising campaigns to raise the awareness and profile of private fostering are only written in English. This limits their effectiveness in reaching some children living in this borough's very diverse communities.
17. The service's response to children who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless does not take sufficient account of children's needs. Where an offer of accommodation is made, children benefit from an extensive offer of placement choice, including foster placements. However, some children are not given access to an advocate and independent advice about their entitlements,

and some children have been actively discouraged from becoming looked after. Senior leaders took action during the inspection to address this.

18. The quality and impact of pre-proceedings work undertaken within the Public Law Outline, are not consistent, and practice does not take enough account of the child's lived experience. With timescales over 40 weeks, a small number of children wait too long for help and remain in situations which are unstable, potentially harmful and do not provide a sense of security. Pre-proceedings processes are sometimes initiated without effective child protection planning having taken place, with appropriate assessments undertaken at an earlier point. This means that some families are subjected to unnecessary pre-proceedings processes.
19. Where practice in pre-proceedings is stronger, practitioners and managers work to clear timescales to protect children. Parenting and risk assessments focus on the child's needs, and swift action is taken when needed to safeguard them. Where successful and timely pre-proceedings are secured, this significantly changes the lived experiences of children, allowing them to live safely with their families without the need to initiate proceedings.
20. Local authority designated officer arrangements are effective and ensure that children are adequately safeguarded. Professionals have good technical knowledge and understanding of child safeguarding processes in this area of complexity. This is an area of strength and is seen as such by education partners.
21. Identifying children who are missing education is challenging in a borough with such a transient population. Professionals liaise frequently across agencies and persistently track children's whereabouts. They take robust action to safeguard children who are missing education and any children being educated at home who are vulnerable.

The experiences and progress of children in care: requires improvement to be good

22. Some children's entry to care comes late, when they have been the subject of repeat interventions and have been living in situations of unaddressed neglect for too long. Some enter care in a traumatic and unplanned way.
23. Once children come into care, they are appropriately matched with carers who meet their cultural and identity needs. Placement stability is enhanced with support from the Special Intervention Service (SIS), so that children can remain with consistent carers and gain a sense of security.
24. Decision-making for children who return home is based on an up-to-date assessment, is consistent with children's needs and leads to appropriate support.

25. For children subject to proceedings, the quality and timeliness of assessments and reports to the family court are improving. However, as senior leaders have recognised, there is still more to do. Issues with court capacity and delays create uncertainty for children, as they wait for hearings to determine decisions about their future.
26. Permanence planning is ineffective for some children. Permanence planning meetings are not held frequently enough or are not of sufficient quality to enable actions towards achieving timely permanence to be effective. The council's permanency panel does not have the strategic overview needed to track the permanency needs of all children who are looked after. This leads to an inconsistent response for children. In stronger and more recent practice, planning is more clearly focused on the child's future, direct work provides insight into their important relationships and family time is supported well, so that children are assisted to feel settled but also connected to their families. Permanency planning, where it is making a difference, assists in care planning considerations and supports effective matching with appropriate carers where children can live long term.
27. Visits to children are regular and stepped up if this is in line with their needs. The effectiveness of visits is mixed, with better visits purposefully engaging children with direct work and creative activities, such as baking or going out for meals and activities. Overall, social workers know their children well and they are significant, consistent people in children's lives. Arrangements for family time are considered thoughtfully and supported well by a specialist contact service, including for children placed out of the area.
28. Most reviews are timely and involve important people in children's lives, with children able to attend and express their views. When children do not wish to attend, their views are consistently sought by independent reviewing officers (IROs). Recommendations from reviews are well written to children. Children's plans are well constructed and include relevant actions that enhance their well-being. Some plans are not updated with sufficient frequency to reflect changes in children's needs and circumstances.
29. The borough's independent visiting scheme is a real strength. It provides long-term stable and committed relationships that add significantly to children's well-being.
30. IROs recognise when delays affect children's lives, and the escalation process is becoming increasingly effective so that actions to progress plans are implemented.
31. The successful recruitment of foster carers is a strength. Placement sufficiency has been a focus for the borough and is a national challenge. In this context, leaders have successfully increased the recruitment of foster carers. Managers and staff attract new carers who live within or near to the borough. This

creates more opportunities for children to live near to their homes and schools, with most children living in fostering homes.

32. Foster carers are well supported by their supervising social workers. This is contributing to stable homes for children, who build relationships over time with their carers.
33. The ongoing development of groups of foster carers working in supportive units is a strength of the service. This, and the placement support provided by the SIS, are successfully building and sustaining relationships for children in foster care. This is having a positive impact on placement stability and allows children to build sustained relationships with their carers. All foster carers have access to support from other carers and this helps to create a robust network, enhancing stability for children. While networks for connected carers have been more informal, embryonic support groups are helping provide important networks for carers.
34. Children's health needs are also met well. Most health assessments are carried out in a timely manner. They result in thorough healthcare plans and sufficient information to ensure that carers can meet children's health needs effectively. Where children have more complex health needs, appropriate assessments inform medication reviews, which are regularly updated to ensure a dynamic response to children's medical needs. Children benefit from a bespoke therapeutic offer, which results in improved emotional well-being and corresponding lower scores on the strengths and difficulties questionnaire.
35. When children are able to live within their family networks, assessments provide information to ensure safe care for children, which is secured through the most appropriate legal framework. When necessary, friends and family carers are provided with legal representation so they have independent advice to scrutinise support plans.
36. Children in care who are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children benefit from forming trusting and positive relationships with their social workers. Workers visit them regularly and undertake creative direct work to get to know them and understand their needs and wishes. Most children's diverse cultural needs are well met, and matching with carers considers their identity needs.
37. An increase in the capacity of the virtual school has assisted with improving the educational attainment for children in care. Children are provided with additional support to better achieve in school, and the virtual school works effectively to avoid exclusions.
38. Children benefit from personal education plans that are regularly updated to track educational progress and ensure that children have access to leisure interests and activities. Most children make progress from their starting points when they enter care.

39. Social worker visits, IRO scrutiny and management oversight for the very small number of children placed in unregistered children's homes are not sufficiently robust. Leaders took immediate remedial action during the inspection to scrutinise these placements and comply with the relevant practice guidance.
40. The recruitment, assessment and training for adopters are now delivered by the regional adoption agency (Adopt London East). Barking and Dagenham works closely with the regional adoption agency to ensure that the agency understands the needs of the children in the borough and finds adoptive parents for them. Early permanence planning is increasingly embedded and successful. However, some children who need adoption wait too long for decisions to be made about where they will live.
41. Life-story work is variable. For some children, particularly those who access the SIS, creative, meaningful and important life-story work is available and it makes a significant difference to them, providing opportunities to build trusting and stable relationships with key adults and brothers and sisters.
42. There is inequality in children's access to life-story work. Those who do not receive appropriate direct work to understand their journey into care and their early family experiences are not enabled to have a good sense of their identity.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

43. The local name for personal advisers is leaving care advisor (LCA). Committed and dedicated LCAs successfully build nurturing and trusting relationships with care leavers. Pathway plans are enhanced by LCAs' understanding of young people's culture and identity, and support care leavers to navigate the crucial steps towards independent living.
44. Staff visit care leavers regularly, and do so more frequently when the young people have greater needs. These visits are well documented and conducted with sensitivity, leading to meaningful conversations about care leavers' current circumstances and needs.
45. The current practice of assigning an LCA to care leavers at 17 and a half years provides insufficient time to consistently accomplish meaningful work to promote young people's life skills, build strong relationships before their 18th birthdays and ensure a smooth transition to the leaving care service.
46. Pathway plans are collaboratively created with care leavers, reflecting their individuality and their views, wishes and aspirations. Most plans identify and address care leavers' unique needs well. They include steps to ensure that care leavers have essential documents like passports and birth certificates. The importance of safe contact with significant individuals in care leavers' lives is recognised and promoted, positively strengthening their sense of identity.
47. Pathway plans contain well-written and compassionate letters written by team managers that focus on young people's achievements and positive progress.

These letters support care leavers' meaningful engagement and create additional connectivity with the service.

48. Staff routinely undertake risk assessments. Where relevant, care leavers' circumstances are considered by the multi-agency child exploitation panel, thereby coordinating information to inform safety planning and reducing risk for care leavers.
49. Care leavers' health needs are mostly well considered in their pathway plans. As a result, care leavers have access to a range of services that support their physical health and emotional well-being. However, sexual health needs are not consistently addressed in care leavers' pathway plans and they do not consistently have access to their health histories.
50. The local offer sets out practical and financial support and entitlements. While not all care leavers are aware of the local offer, LCAs advocate for care leavers and successfully provide access to their entitlements.
51. Care leavers have opportunities to influence the design of services through their various platforms for participation, such as the Skittlz along with the local creative art project, 'you said, we did' feedback and a forum to communicate with the council's top 80 managers. This ensures that practical actions are taken to enhance the council's corporate parenting role.
52. Most care leavers receive positive support tailored to their specific needs, to enable them to be ambitious and aspirational in their education. This includes help with accessing work experience, apprenticeships, and further and higher education.
53. Care leavers who are parents benefit from parenting support and advice, information on parenting classes and the option to attend baby groups linked to the borough's early help offer. The provision of stable accommodation helps these young parents to integrate into the community and become successful parents.
54. Care leavers who are asylum seekers are supported well to meet their identity, religious and cultural needs. Practitioners make good use of interpreters, to ensure that they have a clear understanding of young people's wishes, help them to understand their legal rights and support them with their asylum applications.
55. Persistent LCAs provide dedicated support to vulnerable young people, securing appropriate accommodation and preventing homelessness. Regular check-ins through various communication channels maintain a protective relationship for young people, keeping in touch even in challenging circumstances.
56. The accommodation needs of care leavers, including those who are coming out of custody, are well met. A significant number of care leavers secure tenancies in housing association properties, enabling their move into independent

accommodation. Tenancy support helps to prevent tenancy breakdown. Practical, emotional and budgeting assistance also helps care leavers manage their finances and transition to adulthood successfully.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: requires improvement to be good

57. A significant proportion of the council's budget is allocated to children's services. This assists in the response to a rapidly increasing child population. There has been a tangible commitment from senior council leaders to improve the quality of children's services with investment to increase social work capacity.
58. Despite council investment since the last inspection, overall effectiveness of services still requires improvement to be good. Additional social work capacity and recruitment have helped to manage caseloads. However, leaders are acutely aware that the service's lean management structure has made it harder to manage the volume of need and provide the essential oversight, direction and supervision required to ensure that children make progress.
59. The senior management team for children's services is stable and has been consistent since the last inspection in 2019. The positive impact of leaders is evident in the progress made in a number of important areas for children, including managing workforce capacity, responses for children who are missing from care and/or at risk of exploitation, children placed with parents and young people in the leaving care service.
60. The borough's senior leaders have also positively impacted on partnership working with the additional investment in the MASH. There have been challenge and escalation to health and police partners and this focused approach shows impact, with timescales and responses to children's needs improving. Leaders have set out clear expectations and practice standards, with guidance from centres of excellence supporting practice in complex areas of social work such as child sexual abuse, child exploitation and homelessness. However, consistent application and embedding of practice pathways are not yet confidently in place, so children are not always benefiting from this practice knowledge.
61. Senior managers have struggled in particular to ensure consistently timely interventions for children who experience long-term neglect or unstable home environments and provide a timely response secured with evaluative, evidence-based social work practice in place. This means that a small number of children are left for too long in situations of potential harm before decisive action is taken.
62. While supervision is better in some services, for example in the leaving care and specialist intervention services, it is not consistently in place and effective across all social work teams. Where supervision is less effective, children's plans

stagnate because there is a lack of impactful management direction. This is hindering provision of an equitable service for all children.

63. Since the last inspection, leaders have introduced a revised quality assurance framework and practice evaluation programme. This has ensured that they have accurate information on the standards of social work practice in the service.
64. Leaders are resilient, show fortitude and flexibility, and are creating an enabling, learning culture to support staff development. They value social workers as one of the local authority's best assets. Recruitment of social workers is set within the context of a national shortage, so that the reduction in number of social work vacancies is to be commended. The progress in creating an increasingly stable workforce has been hard sought, with purposeful campaigns to recruit staff from overseas, a competitive recruitment package and steps to support career progression.
65. An active Children in Care Council provides effective challenge to elected members and the senior officers, to strengthen the corporate parenting offer. Children in care and care leavers are heard. They are provided with mentoring and have opportunities through local cultural events to be creative in art and drama.
66. Children's leaders have integrated children's voices and experiences into practice. In particular, they have found innovative ways to seek feedback from children who go missing or who have experienced exploitation.
67. In a borough with particularly high levels of deprivation and migrant families, social workers, early help staff, LCAs and managers are passionate about improving the lives of the children and young people they support. They advocate for them and are acutely aware of the impact the current cost of living crisis and deprivation are having on families in the borough. They offer valuable advice and guide families to access financial support, helping to reduce the impact of poverty on their children.
68. Social workers like working in the borough, and enjoy the rich diversity and the availability of community resources. There is an enthusiastic approach to training and good opportunities to develop experience and expertise, with a strong offer to support internal career advancement. Social workers are supported by an open and supportive management team and an environment where practice is beginning to flourish.

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