

Children's Social Care – Risk Management

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Children's Social Care
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What was the identified risk

- Death or serious harm to a child that was or should have been in receipt of services, either from the council or a partner agency.
- There was an Ofsted Inspection Jan-Feb 2017 which found CSC services to be overall inadequate. The report stated that children and young people are being left in situations of harm and the DFE have issued directions to the borough. A Department for Education improvement advisor will also be identified to work with the Council to support the necessary improvement.
- This risk has been assessed as 5 for Likelihood and 5 for Impact giving a total risk score of 25.

What Ofsted said in April

“There are widespread and serious failures in the services provided to children who need help and protection in Tower Hamlets. As a result, too many children remain in situations of actual or potential harm for too long.”

“Children living with neglect, parental substance misuse or domestic abuse wait too long to receive appropriate help. The deterioration in family relationships and escalation of emotional and behavioural difficulties increase children’s vulnerability to becoming involved in gang activity and serious youth violence.”

“The application of statutory thresholds is inconsistent. This is apparent from the first point of children’s services intervention, including out-of-hours services, core safeguarding activity such as section 47 enquiries, child protection investigations and entry to care. Strategy discussions do not include all relevant agencies.”

What Ofsted said in April

“The assessment quality is poor, risk is not rigorously analysed, and there is insufficient consideration of children’s historical information and their ethnic and cultural needs. The voice of the child and that of parents are evident in the majority of assessments, but direct work with children to understand their lived experiences is weak.”

“Social workers do not visit children regularly enough. Core group meetings include relevant professionals, but do not ensure that plans systematically measure progress. This leads to a lack of purposeful and effective work. There is a lack of urgency and understanding of risk, and too many children experience unacceptable drift and delay.”

“Management oversight of assessments is poor and does not provide sufficient action to ensure that children receive timely help and protection.”

Important note

- While the work that we are currently undertaking, will have the impact of reducing the likelihood of this risk occurring and potentially mitigating the impact, it is not possible to completely eliminate this risk.

Who are our current highest risk young people?

- Vulnerable adolescents – young people who are at risk of gang involvement, child sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation (including county lines) and children who go missing
- Children in care are often targeted by perpetrators who seek to exploit their additional vulnerabilities.
- Very young children are also at higher risk due to their natural vulnerabilities and total dependence on their carers.

How have we responded to these risks?

- Overall Management Oversight was weak – in the most recent performance figures, over 95% of cases have had management oversight in the past eight weeks. This is a significant improvement since Ofsted and is currently on target.
- Non-compliance in core statutory and local requirements – this was a real issue at the time of the inspection with staff not complying with even basic statutory and legal requirements. The changes that have been made indicate that the culture change is being embedded and compliance is improving across the board. Examples include improved timeliness of visits, both CIN and LAC and significant improvement in performance in respect to pre-proceedings.
- Absence of child centred practice – our audit activity indicates that practice has become much more child centred. This was also commented on by Ofsted in their most recent monitoring visit. “Social workers and their managers are much more focused on ensuring that children’s voices and their lived experiences are captured and acted on.” & “Social workers’ more confident use of direct work tools to assess and analyse risks to children is beginning to inform decisions about children’s ongoing plans.”

How have we responded to these risks?

- Key threshold decisions – we have launched our new threshold document which is in line with most local authorities in London. Partners have been involved in the development and launch of the new model and have been involved in the roll out. The number of cases that “step down” following assessment continues to reduce indicating an improvement in our application of thresholds
- Risk assessment/Risk Management – with much more robust processes in place for our highest risk young people we are better placed to risk manage. We are implementing “trigger plans” for regular missing children and our Edge of Care Services are beginning to have an impact.
- Children’s Plans and Reviews – this continues to be an area of strong focus. 92% of Children in Need have had a review in the past 6 months which is a significant increase since September 2017. Child Protection Review timeliness also continues to improve.
- Achieving Permanence – We have significantly reduced the number of children waiting to be matched. We have also introduced much more robust decision making in respect to placement moves via our new Independent Placement Overview Panel (IPOP)

How have we responded to these risks?

- Drift, Delay and Escalation – assessment timeliness has improved significantly and is currently above the national average and that of statistical neighbours. We have reduced the timescale for pre-proceedings to 12 weeks which is the statutory target and a significant improvement since the time of the inspection. Care proceedings average 31 weeks, which while above the 26 week target has been impacted by a number of complex cases.
- Staff development and competence – Research in Practice were commissioned to deliver a “Back to Basics” course for all social workers. The feedback from this course was largely positive. We have followed this up with a training needs analysis which has identified some of the strengths and weaknesses of the workforce and we are actively addressing these.
- Quality assurance and performance management – a much more rigorous process of performance management is in place which takes many forms. This includes regular performance surgeries chaired by the divisional director, use of child level data by team and service managers and regular performance reporting to senior managers. A new process of audit has been put in place which Ofsted reported had been “increasingly embedded”

What has happened since

- We have had two monitoring visits by Ofsted. During both of these visits, inspectors spent time observing practice in the front door and with our FSP Teams. The feedback from both these visits was largely positive, commenting that we had made good progress in the areas that they focused on.
- We are working very hard to ensure that any changes are embedded and sustainable. Ofsted commented that they felt that the changes observed in the front door during their first visit had been embedded by the time of the second.
- Our third monitoring visit will take place on the 1st & 2nd of May. The focus will be our highest risk children, particularly those who are linked to gangs, regularly go missing and/or are being criminally exploited.
- The new Exploitation Team has started and will receive additional resources by April. This team of police officers and staff from the LA will be concentrating their efforts on identifying and disrupting the exploitation of children.
- The ongoing focus on compliance and performance continues to embed with our audit activity strongly indicating that this is having a positive impact on the quality of social work.
- We continue not to be complacent and are working hard to ensure that improvements seen in some parts of the service are replicated across the board.