

London Borough of Tower Hamlets

Inspection of children’s social care services

Inspection dates: 10 June 2019 to 21 June 2019

**Lead inspector: Marcie Taylor
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	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Services for children in Tower Hamlets are now good and have substantially improved since they were found to be inadequate in 2017. Since then, leaders and managers have had a relentless focus to improve practice to deliver good experiences and progress for children and their families. At all levels, there is effective management oversight and a direct understanding of the quality of significantly improved frontline practice.

Effective and well-coordinated universal and early help provision means that children and families receive good help when they need it. Children in need, including those in need of protection, benefit from good assessments that inform plans to reduce risk and improve children’s circumstances. The workforce reflects the diversity of the local population and staff sensitively take account of, and respond appropriately to, the cultural and religious needs of children and families in Tower Hamlets.

Children in care and care leavers receive good support from workers who know them well and are appropriately ambitious for them. They live in stable homes, which helps them to do their best in all aspects of their lives.

What needs to improve

- The quality of plans for children in need across the family support and protection teams in order to ensure that they are consistently good or better.
- The response and oversight of work in relation to allegations made against professionals.
- The quality and coordination of plans to support children returning home from care to remain with their families.

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

1. Children and their families benefit from an extensive range of increasingly well-coordinated multi-agency early help support. Since the previous inspection in 2017, the local authority and partner agencies have taken carefully considered action to reconfigure and target services to ensure that they are effective. This ensures that early help services are offered based on assessed need, and are responsive. Children benefit from bespoke and skilled work undertaken by knowledgeable early help practitioners. They diligently deliver intensive direct work to children experiencing neglect, and those living with parental substance misuse, poor mental health and domestic abuse.
2. The local authority and partners are committed to developing and supporting effective early help through universal service provision. Schools have termly meetings on attendance and behaviour and an ongoing programme of safeguarding audits. Prompt action follows when concerns are raised by schools about safeguarding practice in schools. For example, the curriculum has been developed to help to prevent extremism and radicalisation. There is also training to develop staff's understanding of attachment, and the healthy schools programme is employed effectively.
3. Several schools directly employ social workers, who provide advice and guidance to pastoral and other staff and undertake direct work with children and their families. Both elective home education (EHE) and children missing education (CME) staff use early help assessments well when children and their families need additional support. The 'team around the child' approach helps secure additional support for children, for example mentoring. EHE staff have high regard for children's welfare and go the extra mile.

4. Referrals into the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) are appropriate and reflect partners' good understanding of thresholds. Initial referred concerns are screened by experienced managers, and work is allocated according to risk, using coloured 'banners' that highlight clear actions to individual workers. This enables confident, timely and safe progression of the high volume of daily contacts. A daily MASH meeting ensures effective multi-agency collaboration that leads to appropriate and timely decision-making for children. Disabled children's workers offer a duty service in the MASH, meaning that timely decisions are taken about how best to help and protect children with complex needs. Consent is routinely sought and when concerns escalate, it is overridden appropriately. All work is allocated quickly and effectively for an assessment of children's needs.
5. Children receive effective support and interventions from the out-of-hours emergency duty team. Clear practice standards are in place, underpinned by a range of tools to support risk assessment and decision-making. Records are comprehensive and demonstrate proportionate involvement, good decision-making and actions appropriate to need and risk. Good communication between out-of-hours and daytime services means that children receive a timely and highly effective service that improves their immediate situation.
6. Most assessments are comprehensive and analytical. They demonstrate effective and thoughtful engagement with families and a good understanding of children's needs. Careful account is taken of family history, and consistently strong efforts are made to understand the impact of parental cultures, religious and belief systems, and the impact of mental illness, poverty and domestic abuse. The quality of social work practice in the family support and protection teams has significantly improved. Inspectors did not find any children at risk of immediate harm. This is vastly different from the 2017 inspection, when high numbers of children were left unprotected. In most cases, good work is helping to improve circumstances for children. Across a small number of teams, there is too much variability in practice that the local authority is working to address.
7. The local authority's approach to EHE children is underpinned by a strong safeguarding culture. Children are seen annually in order to establish their progress, and parents are supported through network meetings to help them provide a good-quality education for their children, including advice on the curriculum. Celebration events are held for EHE children. Effective arrangements are in place to identify children who are not registered at school and not receiving a suitable education. Staff act promptly to identify missing children and gain a good understanding of their circumstances. Rigorous checks are undertaken to establish the whereabouts of children. Most children missing education are quickly identified and found a school place.

8. Most child protection and child in need plans are realistic and identify clear desired outcomes so parents and children understand and address concerns. When risks escalate, effective and appropriate action is taken to mitigate this and keep children safe. Records are thorough and up to date and are produced in a timely manner for core groups, child protection visits and conferences. The child's voice is clearly represented in minutes and plans. There is appropriate use of advocates and family group conferences to engage families and provide a wide range of services to support and help parents.
9. The impact of the strategic neglect work has led to better recognition and understanding of the impact of accumulative neglect. The increasing use of the neglect tool is improving the understanding of this on the child's lived experience. There is clear evidence that workers are specifically and appropriately 'naming neglect', and there has been a significant move away from categorising such risk under emotional abuse.
10. Children are seen regularly and alone according to their assessed need, and there is evidence of persistent child-centred work. Knowledgeable workers use relationship-based work through a wide range of tools, including the neglect tool, and direct work through games, writing and outings. The use of video interactive guidance helps parents understand the impact of substance misuse. This leads to reduced risk and helps to effectively capture children's wishes and feelings to inform plans.
11. Management oversight is clearly evidenced on children's files; it is regular and covers key decision points appropriately in children's lives. This includes appropriate senior management oversight to ensure that plans are progressed in a timely manner.
12. Improved oversight of plans from child protection chairs through midway reviews prevents risks of drift in progressing plans. Clear contingency planning, including use of Public Law Outline (PLO), has seen the numbers of care applications rise for younger children. This reflects senior managers' decision to refocus resources on early intervention and tackle childhood neglect, in this, the most deprived local authority in England (English Indices of Deprivation). Performance data and systems to track and review children subject to PLO are well established. This is preventing drift and leads to timely decisions about applications to family courts. Decisions are underpinned by effective and accessible legal advice at the weekly legal gateway meeting.
13. Disabled children's assessments and plans are of a good standard. They inform actions that keep children safe and improve their circumstances. All assessments give clear focus to the needs of individual children, their health and development. They appropriately consider culture and heritage, critically analyse parenting capacity (including fathers) and recognise and summarise

risk. Children experience continuity of social worker from the point of referral, which enables them to build meaningful relationships with workers who know them well. Children benefit from early planning to secure ongoing support into adulthood.

14. Highly vulnerable children at risk of exploitation, including those missing from home, school or care, receive effective, bespoke services, delivered sensitively by skilled and committed staff. Strong partnerships serve to protect these children from harm. This is a significant improvement since the inspection in 2017, when too many exploited children were left unprotected. Emerging risks to young people are identified early, through an innovative multi-agency co-located exploitation team and gangs unit. Information is continually and quickly evaluated, leading to effective disruptive action to perpetrators. In collaboration with the community safety rapid response team, emerging incidents are quickly diffused. These children benefit from plans that are overseen by effective complex multi-agency strategy meetings and regular reviews. Targeted creative approaches are employed to build relationships with children, and risk is reduced. Excellent work by the exploitation team ensures that social workers and early help practitioners are knowledgeable and confident in recognising the signs of exploitation and the impact of neglect, domestic abuse and absent fathers, which increases vulnerability to exploitation. Vulnerable adolescents in care receive well-coordinated services, including those adolescents who are placed out of area.
15. Arrangements for the completion of return home interviews (RHIs) have been streamlined and are effective. The quality of RHIs has improved. A specifically trained group of professionals from the MASH, out-of-hours and early help services regularly visit children to conduct interviews. There is a strong emphasis on working alongside and with young people at the earliest opportunity. The development of a weekend RHI service carried out by the same practitioners is helping children to develop purposeful relationships with professionals and avoids them having to repeat their stories.
16. Risks to children of female genital mutilation and radicalisation are identified and referred to the MASH by relevant professionals, who demonstrate an inquisitive and sensitive awareness of the cultural vulnerabilities to children in their communities. High-level risks of the radicalisation of young people are understood and recognised very well. Assessments are thorough and result in appropriate support, including protection orders and ongoing interventions, usually within a child in need plan.
17. Children at risk of becoming homeless are quickly identified through the MASH or the housing service. Joint assessments are undertaken where this is appropriate. In most cases, the dedicated specialist homeless social worker leads or supports comprehensive assessments of need that often mean homelessness is prevented or that children appropriately come into care, where they are well supported.

18. A new system to ensure consistent and rigorous response to allegations against professionals is not yet fully established and does not effectively track and monitor the progress of casework. The action plan to progress this work lacks clear priorities to highlight proactive engagement with agencies in raising awareness of their responsibilities to report and act on concerns, for example with the diverse range of local community and faith groups.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: Good

19. Children come into care appropriately when risks increase for them and they are no longer able to safely live at home. Workers in the 'edge of care' team build close and trusting relationships with children, and effective support enables many to remain safely living at home or with other family members.
20. For children returning home from care, the quality of practice is not consistent. Some children benefit from thorough planning and collaborative multi-agency work. For other children whose plan is to return home, plans are not supported by an up-to-date assessment. Some children experience delay in the revocation of care orders, despite them asking for this to happen. The local authority knows it needs to improve integrated work between teams so that children are more effectively supported when they return home.
21. Family finding for children who cannot live safely with birth parents is timely through the legal gateway process. All permanence options, including special guardianship orders and adoption, are now considered simultaneously, including assessments of family members and whether brothers and sisters can live together. Exceptional effort is made to ensure that children can live with their families and friends. Regular permanence planning meetings ensure that progress is made against the child's specific care plan. The head of service has modelled excellent child-centred practice effectively, 'skilling up' team managers to make confident decisions.
22. Children's views are clear in assessments, which are regularly updated. Care plans are child-centred, and most are comprehensive and analytical, and include contingency plans. Children's wishes influence care planning. Social workers visit children regularly, strive to have meaningful relationships with them and speak about them with real affection. Manageable caseloads allow time for sensitive and creative direct work to help children understand their experiences and improve their life chances.
23. The work of the independent reviewing officers (IROs) has improved significantly. Midway monitoring and visits to see children with their carers brings additional rigour and oversight. Evidence of effective challenge is ensuring progress of care plans and reduces delay, including alerts to keep

planning on track. IROs are creative in their approach to get to know children, and reviews are child-centred.

24. Children's physical and emotional health needs are quickly assessed and met and are regularly reviewed. Clinicians and psychologists work collaboratively with social workers, foster carers and other professionals to support them to develop skills that help traumatised children. They do this by, for example, advising hospital-based staff on how to care for children who self-harm, and the edge of care team on how to work with children to support emotional well-being and issues of previous trauma and abuse.
25. Personal education plans (PEPs) provide a sound basis to plan and review the progress children make. Children in care receive effective support from the virtual school staff, who understand their individual needs and act as effective advocates for them. This helps children stay on track to achieve their goals, and, consequently, many make good progress from their starting points.
26. A strong enrichment programme supports children's academic, personal and social development. A summer residential for children in care helps the transition of pupils into secondary school and study support groups help preparation for tests and exams.
27. Most children attend school regularly. Although improving, the proportion of those persistently absent at Key Stage 4 is too high. Once they complete year 11, a good proportion move into further education and training. However, attendance is not good for some young people, and this inhibits their progress. Plans are in place to address this.
28. The quality and stability of placements for children in care is good. Children are specifically matched with long-term carers, and this is systematically reviewed when they have been in care for six months. The 'Mockingbird' project is well established. Children and foster carers are matched together, allowing children to go to other carers for a break with a foster family they know well. Foster carer hubs, led by experienced carers, provide mentoring and support to improve long-term stability of children with more complex needs.
29. The recruitment of foster carers benefits from a dedicated family finding coordinator and a community resource officer for outreach work in the borough's diverse communities. The recruitment of suitable carers is challenging; however, assiduous action, including the recruitment of carers, and developing existing carers to meet the specific needs of their care population, is addressing this.
30. Foster carers feel highly valued, they receive good support and extensive training focused on meeting the needs of children. Good training opportunities are available in support groups, hubs, and one-to-one during

supervisory visits. A wide range of effective support for foster carers includes mentoring, fostering champions, fostering ambassadors, and fostering potential (educational support for primary school children). Support groups include 'staying put' carers, and sons and daughters of carers. An excellent Foster Carers Association contributes to national guidance, for example guidance for caring for Muslim children, and is integral to the positive development of the service.

31. The adoption service has made considerable improvements since the previous inspection, including doubling the numbers of approved adopters and adoption orders from the previous 12 months. An embedded culture of early permanence planning is promoted by the improvement manager, who has established a clear working structure and a secure system of family finding, tracking and parallel planning.
32. There is a clear and comprehensive recruitment strategy for adopters, particularly for same-sex couples. Feedback from adopters describes workers as extremely supportive, putting their 'heart and soul' into the work. All spoken to would recommend Tower Hamlets as an adoption agency. Assessments of adopters' suitability are improving in quality, analysis and timeliness. Matching reports sensitively identify the needs of children and good use of a virtual reality headset in the assessment process helps to bring alive the realities of adoption. This enables prospective adopters to understand the experience of the child. The experienced agency decision-maker is appropriately challenging and provides good, clear, detailed and timely decisions, which are well recorded.
33. Adopters benefit from a wide range of high-quality training and support. This includes regular visits to guide them through the adoption and post-approval process. Adopters spoke positively about the dedicated therapeutic life-story workers who help children build a clear and realistic account of their early life history. Thoughtful, comprehensive adoption support plans actively consider a wide range of actual and future needs of children. The adoption support fund is routinely considered and utilised for ongoing therapeutic intervention and consultation with psychologists.
34. For children leaving care, the 'through-care' service provides strong supportive relationships between most staff and young people, including proactive work with young people in custody. Young people value the easy access and the services provided at the weekly drop-in at 'Kitcat Terrace', with one young person stating, 'I grew up here; this is my family.'
35. Pathway plans are reviewed regularly, and most are comprehensive and reflect young people's needs, wishes and feelings well. Young people's rights and entitlements are clearly recorded. There is a focus on making sure that young people have the key documents they need. For unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC), pathway plans clearly identify actions in

relation to securing immigration status, and this is well embedded. Legal provision is accessible and trauma with UASC is well recognised. The 'Mockingbird' project helps UASC develop supportive relationships with other young people from the same country of origin.

36. Increasingly, young people are helped to access education, employment and training, and an increasing number of young people access apprenticeships in the council. Plans to introduce education champions to work alongside virtual school staff are underway to focus additional support on young people who are at risk of absenting from purposeful activity.
37. The range of accommodation for care leavers is reported by care leavers to be of a good quality. A multi-disciplinary housing panel effectively considers young people's specific vulnerabilities and tailors support to help them remain in their homes. An increasing number of care leavers remain living with their foster carers well into adulthood. Successful stays in semi-independent accommodation earn young people a 'nomination' for their own tenancy. Staff manage this well, using this to helpfully motivate young people towards independence.

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

38. Senior leaders and elected members have focused relentlessly on improving practice across all services, changing the culture and tackling previous poor performance. This has made a significant and discernible difference to the help, protection and care experienced by the most vulnerable children in the borough. Leaders and managers have been effective in addressing all areas of poor performance identified in the previous inspection, with all recommendations being appropriately acted on. They demonstrate a shared responsibility and have a comprehensive understanding of their strengths and further areas for development. They are realistic about and cognisant of the challenges that they face in order to embed and sustain the remarkable progress they have achieved since the inspection of 2017.
39. The corporate director for children and culture has effectively influenced and collaborated with a range of partners and corporate leaders to transform the non-compliance culture in children's services to one of collective accountability for protecting vulnerable children. The focus of senior leaders has been to create sustainable change and to develop appropriate future leaders across the organisation. There has been incremental change that has enabled managers 'to take people with them', and to really understand what had previously gone wrong.
40. Work across partner agencies has been led through the local safeguarding children's board and there is now a culture of collaboration, shared priorities, and investment in joint resources. Examples include the development of the

exploitation team, the focus on neglect and the significant improvements to the health needs of children in care. Collaboration to improve the lives of children who experience neglect is a priority for the partnership, and effective multi-agency work is having a positive impact on coordinating and delivering early help services to reduce risk.

41. Leaders, managers and staff have high ambitions for children in care and strive to meet these. Their work with care leavers is commendably underpinned by the question 'would it be good enough for my child?' All the essential components are in place for them to be good corporate parents. Recent actions include care leavers' exemption from council tax, the housing offer for care leavers, and the retention of 'Kitcat Terrace' as an accessible facility for care leavers, in direct response to young people's feedback. As corporate parents, they have taken further action to improve participation for younger children in the children in care council.
42. The local authority has transformed its performance management framework from unreliable and non-compliant to a highly effective and established quality assurance system. Its accurate assessment of the quality and impact of practice is supported by a well-established and comprehensive performance framework informed by routine and regular case audits, practice observations and feedback from children and families.
43. Local need is both highly challenging and well understood, for example the high levels of poverty, deprivation and subsequent high levels of demand for services. The council responds to this respectfully and with inclusivity. The Parent and Family Support Service builds resilience, independence and sustainability in local communities to support early help and is highly valued by the parents involved. They feel empowered as parents and take great pride in the work they are doing to support other parents to engage with critical universal and targeted services at an early stage.
44. Senior leaders demonstrate that they are receptive to learning from external reviews, including peer review, safeguarding assurance visits and practice challenge sessions. The 'monthly highlight audit report' identifies themes of improving practice and areas for further development. There is clear evidence that issues identified for improvement result in key learning actions and better practice, for example the inclusion of fathers in assessments, plans and interventions, and the use of safety plans for children who experience domestic abuse, from recently published serious case reviews.
45. At all levels of the service, there is effective management oversight and grip. Inspectors did not find any children living at risk of actual harm; rather, they found decisive timely action to protect children. Permanence planning is tightly managed strategically, and is overseen effectively by senior managers, who know children well. Vigorous checks on the progress of individual children through robust tracking systems are in place through, for example,

the monthly permanence summit meeting. A similar summit provides management overview of the progress of children on child in need plans for over six months and includes helpful discussions to improve outcomes.

46. A strong emphasis on developing the social work academy and nurturing newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) encourages more to remain in the local authority. For example, the council kept additional staff capacity as advanced practitioners to support NQSWs to improve their knowledge, skills and confidence. The use of 'frontline' and 'step up to social work' and Open University degrees for non-qualified staff has enabled the local authority to develop a strong and increasingly permanent workforce.
47. Staff morale is high. Staff influence developments and are included in decisions, for example the introduction of a restorative model of practice. Staff want to work in Tower Hamlets, and many agency staff are converting to permanent contracts. The local authority has invested in staff to ensure that caseloads are manageable; this enables children to build trusting relationships with social workers and creates the right environment for good practice.



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