

# Inspection of Lewisham local authority children's services

**Inspection dates:** 4 to 15 December 2023

**Lead inspector:** Nicki Shaw, His Majesty's Inspector

| <b>Judgement</b>   | <b>Grade</b> |
|--|--------------|
| 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                         | Good         |
| The experiences and progress of care leavers                             | Good         |
| Overall effectiveness  | Good         |

A determined focus by the experienced Executive Director for Children & Young People (DCS) and his highly effective leadership team has driven widespread improvements in services since the last inspection in 2019. Children and young people now benefit from good, high-quality help and support. The pace of change has been purposeful, and the areas identified for improvement at previous inspections have been prioritised, leading to better outcomes for children.

Political and corporate leaders are committed corporate parents and ambitious for children and young people. Additional investment has been provided to strengthen services and stabilise the workforce. This includes a targeted early help service which has been fully developed and embedded since the last inspection, so that children and families receive timely and appropriate support. Partnerships with key stakeholders are well developed, supporting continued improvements for vulnerable children.

## **What needs to improve?**

- Tracking arrangements for children who are subject to pre-proceedings processes, including the timeliness of letters before proceedings and mid-point reviews.
- Oversight arrangements to progress permanence for children in long-term foster care.
- Assessments to support decisions when children with care orders return home to live with their parents.
- Personal advisers' (PAs) understanding of the discretionary payment offer for young people leaving care, and how well they explain it to young people.

## **Experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: good**

1. Leaders reviewed early help services in 2020 and following a new Early Help & Prevention Strategy, informed by the concerns raised in the 2019 inspection, ensured that they were better targeted at need. This included the creation of a new Family Thrive Service. Children and families now benefit from timely and appropriate support in response to identified needs. Workers capture the voice of the child well in early help assessments. Plans have clear outcomes and are regularly reviewed, ensuring that interventions are targeted and outcomes can be measured. Children's cases are appropriately stepped up from early help to children's social care.
2. Contacts and referrals are managed within a timely and effective system, ensuring that those with the highest level of need and concern are given priority. Consent is appropriately considered and over-ridden. Social workers make good use of children's histories to inform assessments of risk and need, and decision-making. Management oversight routinely ensures that thresholds are appropriately applied, so that children receive the right level of service.
3. Out-of-hours services are well managed and coordinated within the same service as the multi-agency safeguarding hub. This helps to promote a seamless response between day and out-of-hours services. Following a joint targeted area inspection, leaders have put additional resources into out-of-hours services. This has strengthened leaders' ability to respond to crises.
4. Most children's assessments are completed in timescales appropriate to their needs. The analysis of risk and need is thorough and informed by professional curiosity. This assists with decision-making. Prebirth assessments are timely, proportionate to risk and make appropriate recommendations to safeguard unborn babies. Social workers consider children's cultural identities in most assessments, appropriately informing plans. Disabled children benefit from comprehensive assessments and plans to ensure that their needs are met.
5. Children receive an appropriate and proportionate response when risks to their well-being escalate. Strategy discussions are attended by relevant multi-agency

partners, who share information to inform the analysis of risk. Robust actions ensure that children are safeguarded and not left in vulnerable situations.

6. Children in need and child protection plans are detailed and child focused. They do not always include timescales, making it difficult to assess the progress made and whether outcomes for children have been achieved. Contingency plans are often explored when social workers are creating safety plans for children, so they can remain in their family network when risks increase and it is not safe for them to live at home. Core groups and child-in-need meetings are regular and well attended by families and relevant professionals.
7. Children who are potentially at risk of exploitation benefit from a prompt and highly effective response from the 'Safe Space' service. Assessments are thorough and carefully consider cultural and push-and-pull factors. Detailed planning supports interventions to reduce and mitigate risk. At a strategic level, multi-agency child exploitation meetings are well attended by key stakeholders. Leaders have developed an effective partnership response to exploitation, for example identifying exploitation 'hot spots' to inform disruption activities.
8. The missing coordinator and a small team of practitioners respond effectively when children go missing from home or care. They endeavour to meet young people on their return and complete return home interviews. Professionals attend a multi-agency panel to review information and intelligence and ensure that appropriate priority is given to locating children who remain missing.
9. Young people who present as homeless routinely receive a joint assessment of their needs from children's social care and housing professionals. Where appropriate, they are offered the option to come into care, and are supported to do so. The assessment centre is a valued resource for children who are supported under s17, ensuring that they do not become homeless, and providing support for children to access benefits while their wider needs are being assessed.
10. Management oversight for private fostering arrangements is robust. A dedicated social worker, team manager and head of service in the kinship team ensure that there is a consistent response to children who are privately fostered.
11. The local authority designated officer service is effective in managing allegations made about professionals who may pose a risk to children. Regular meetings are held with the safeguarding leads for education and early years to improve safer recruitment and reporting processes, reducing the risk of harm to children.
12. Decisions to progress children to pre-proceedings are supported by a clear rationale and recorded well. Letters before proceedings are of a consistent quality, but they haven't always been sent within the agreed timeframe, and initial public law outline meetings have not happened quickly enough. While dates for mid-point reviews are routinely set, these have not always been taking

place in a timely way to ensure progress. This has led to drift and delay for some children. Leaders are aware that improving the timeliness of pre-proceedings work is a priority for development. Recently implemented tracking systems are starting to help with the more timely progression of children through the pre-proceedings process.

13. Children and families at risk of family breakdown, and children needing to come into care, benefit from highly effective work undertaken by social workers and other highly skilled practitioners across a range of disciplines. The team involved works intensively with families to well-coordinated plans to ensure that children's needs are met.
14. Effective arrangements are in place to identify and assess arrangements for children who are electively home educated. As a result, staff are better able to intervene where there are concerns about children's welfare.
15. Staff remain tenacious and proactive in tracking and following up on reported cases of children missing education. Leaders use a variety of information sources to track these children and, as a result, most are located.

### **Experiences and progress of children in care: good**

16. In most cases, children become looked after when it is in their best interests, with effective decision-making and scrutiny by senior managers. Living with connected carers and special guardians is a priority for children who cannot safely remain with their parents. Assessments of family members are prompt, with careful management oversight to ensure that children receive appropriate care.
17. Social workers carefully consider children's needs, including their cultural and identity needs, when seeking an appropriate foster home. Children are visited regularly and have developed trusting and positive relationships with their social workers and other professionals who help them, such as mentors. Children are supported to spend time with family members who are important to them.
18. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive high-quality care, with their individual needs being sensitively met by their carers and social workers. These children benefit from appropriate accommodation, education and training. They are supported at the earliest opportunity to secure legal representation, so they can make their asylum application and understand their rights and entitlements.
19. Where children are being supported to live with their parents while subject to care orders, they continue to receive appropriate help and support. However, the recording and planning for a small number of these children need to be more robust to ensure that care arrangements continue to meet children's needs.

20. Children have well-established relationships with independent reviewing officers, who regularly review their care plans. Children attend and contribute to their reviews. Parents and professionals also attend, so relevant information is shared and children's emerging needs are considered in future plans. Children's outcomes and views are clearly recorded. Children who want to access their records in later life will benefit from understanding how and why decisions were made about their care and futures. Children receive a friendly and child-focused letter after their review, an improvement following a focused visit in 2021.
21. Independent officer oversight between children's reviews is not as effective when planning permanence for children in long-term foster care or when children are placed with parents without an assessment. The escalation process is not always securing a timely and satisfactory resolution. Consequently, some children experience drift and delay in the progression of their plans.
22. Children benefit from creative life-story work and direct work undertaken by skilled social workers using a range of tools and adapted communication methods. This work supports children across the age range, including those with additional needs, to share information that is important to them and inform plans for their futures. Life-story work enables children to better understand their history and experiences. The experience of young people is captured by one young person's comment: 'Being a child in care in Lewisham is good and the benefits are good.'
23. Children benefit from conscientious social workers who understand the risks and vulnerabilities associated with extra-familial harm, including trafficking and risks for children who go missing from care. Safeguarding measures are appropriately applied to protect children from harm. Appropriate management oversight ensures effective monitoring, review and planning.
24. Most children have timely initial health assessments when they come into care. They have access to healthcare services, such as a named GP, dentist and optician. There is a timely and effective response to children who present with harmful behaviours to themselves and others, and to children with complex needs, who are escalated through jointly commissioned specialist assessments to mitigate delays in accessing child and family mental health services.
25. The virtual school provides a high-quality service and is led effectively. Holistic support for children who live in and outside Lewisham is highly effective. For example, the virtual school makes good use of in-house educational psychologists to support children. As a result, most children in care and care leavers remain in education and training and make good progress.
26. Most children's personal education plans are of a high quality, an improvement since the last inspection. The virtual school considers the views of children looked after during the review process. Targets set by staff are well informed by

thorough ongoing assessment. As a result, it is clear what steps need to be taken for children to improve their knowledge, skills and behaviours.

27. While planning for early permanence through special guardianship and adoption is strong, arrangements for supporting permanence is not effective for children in long-term foster care. This creates delay for children in achieving a sense of belonging and stability. Management oversight is not sufficient to progress some children's plans.
28. When children are placed at a distance from Lewisham, staff now notify receiving local authorities and ensure that appropriate support and services are in place. This is an improvement since the last focused visit.
29. There is a renewed focus on placement sufficiency, and efforts are being made to expand the range of in-house foster carers with new initiatives and innovation. Leaders have secured external funding to help strengthen fostering recruitment activity. The recruitment and assessment process for foster carers is thorough. The Lewisham Supporting Carers scheme, support groups and mentoring arrangements are valued by new foster carers. Carers also felt valued and appreciated by a recent awards ceremony.
30. Fostering and adoption panel arrangements are effective, with experienced chairs and appropriately trained panel members representing both diversity and professional expertise.
31. The local authority works closely with the regional adoption agency (Adopt London South), but there are some delays in finding families for some Lewisham children. This is further compounded by delays in adoption order hearings. When children join their adoptive family, they benefit from later life letters that are written sensitively for them.
32. Most children leave care into permanence in a planned way, with well-thought-out transitions. Special guardians and adopters receive continuing support in response to children's changing needs.

### **Experiences and progress of care leavers: good**

33. Young people benefit from thoughtful and determined PAs, who support them to achieve their potential. PAs are ambitious for young people. They advocate on young people's behalf and secure support and services in line with their needs and best interests.
34. Young people enjoy contact at a frequency that is right for them. PAs communicate with young people using a range of social media platforms. This ensures that young people can keep in touch in a way that is flexible and helpful to them. Young people know who they can share their worries with, and how to

make a complaint if they are unhappy. Young people in custody also receive practical and financial support and help with planning for their release.

35. The council has established a council for care leavers named 'Elevation'. A group of engaging Elevation members met with inspectors and confidently shared their views, including historical concerns about the support they received when they left the care of the local authority. Young people who have recently transitioned to adulthood now report receiving good support.
36. The transitions panel, with multiagency representation, promotes an effective, joined-up and well-coordinated response to children's needs, identifying services to support their plans for adulthood. Social workers and PAs are considerate and thoughtful when planning for young people's transitions, which are progressed at a pace that is comfortable for them. Young people stay in touch with their PA and maintain good relationships with them when aged 21 and over. If young people decide they do not require an allocated PA, contact is maintained through a duty system. A recently established weekly drop-in also ensures access to timely support for young people.
37. The offer of practical and emotional support to assist young people's transition into adulthood is a strength. The local offer is written in accessible language, it clearly illustrates the support available to young people and is updated regularly. The offer is referred to in young people's pathway plans, but not all PAs fully understand the discretionary payment offer, which could lead to young people missing out on services to meet their needs.
38. Pathway plans are of good quality. PAs co-produce and regularly review these plans with young people, and many are written in the young person's voice. This promotes a greater sense of autonomy, and ensures that plans are amended to reflect new and emerging needs and support.
39. Young people are encouraged to participate in social activities and supported through further and higher education. Most young people remain in education, employment and training. Young people feel that their PA is ambitious for them.
40. Most young people receive health assessments and health summaries before they leave care, ensuring that their health information is up to date. Specialist commissioned services are available for young people, including therapeutic interventions to support their emotional and mental health. Young people also have access to free prescriptions to assist in meeting their health needs.
41. Young people are helped to apply for their own tenancy when they are ready. A breadth of accommodation options is available, with a range of provision to suit individual needs. Young people told inspectors that they feel safe in their accommodation and are happy with the level of support they receive. They have exemption from council tax payments until they reach the age of 25.

42. Where possible, young people are supported to remain in staying put arrangements. Young people in these arrangements describe their foster carers as their family. Young people at university return to their previous supported lodging placements during holidays and weekends. Young people have access to their key documents to give them more control and independence into adulthood. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people have advocates to support them with their immigration status and asylum applications. PAs help young people to prepare for adult life, whether they remain in the UK or return to their country of origin should their asylum claim be rejected.

### **Impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: good**

43. Ambitious and determined senior leaders know their services well. They have strengthened services since the last inspection and have plans in place to address areas that require further improvement. The self-evaluation provides an honest appraisal of service strengths and areas for development, as well as the impact of workforce instability on performance. Leaders have set out ambitious priorities for workforce development and a comprehensive offer for staff. The tenacious workforce development team has driven forward the strategy, which has contributed to stability, helped attract agency staff to become permanent and influenced the conditions for success so that social work can flourish.

44. The lead member and the chief executive are ambitious for children. They are well informed about demands on the service, meet regularly with the executive director and receive high-quality performance and practice reports. Despite financial pressures, the council has provided additional funding to develop and strengthen services for the most vulnerable children in Lewisham. This has included significant investment to develop the targeted early help strategy and establish the Family Thrive service in 2021, improving early support and intervention for children and families. Leaders have also secured Department for Education 'Start for Life' funding to support the development of family hubs, three of which they launched in 2023.

45. The local children's safeguarding partnership arrangements strengthen governance and scrutiny. Experienced strategic leaders hold each other to account through the executive strand of the partnership to safeguard the most vulnerable children. The work of the partnership is overseen by an independent scrutineer, who promotes cooperation between partner agencies to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.

46. The local authority, with partners, is working effectively to reduce vulnerability to extra-familial harm. At a strategic level, multi-agency child exploitation meetings are well attended by key stakeholders, who continue to develop a partnership response to exploitation, for example sharing intelligence to identify exploitation 'hot spots' to inform disruption activities.



47. The judiciary reports that leaders have listened to feedback about weaker areas of practice in court proceedings, and leaders have made necessary improvements to avoid drift and delay for children requiring legal permanence. However, both the District Judge and CAFCASS have highlighted the need to further improve communication with the local authority, to ensure that issues and concerns are mutually understood and addressed.
48. An ambitious corporate parenting strategy (Our Pledge) promotes a one-council approach to promoting the welfare of care-experienced children and young people. Corporate parenting roles are clearly defined. The lead member is proactive in ensuring that the council and partner agencies fulfil their corporate parenting responsibilities.
49. The virtual school is a considerable strength. It is well led and provides highly effective, holistic support for young people living within or outside the borough. For example, the virtual school makes good use of internal educational psychologists to assess and support children's needs. As a result, most children looked after and young people leaving care make good progress and remain in education and training.
50. The elective home education team works particularly closely with the virtual school, educational psychologists and social workers. This joined-up approach means that the proportion of vulnerable children being electively home educated has significantly reduced, as more children are placed in provision that meets their needs.
51. The sufficiency strategy is informed by national and local trends, and was developed through collaboration with children, young people, carers and providers. Leaders have strengthened the focus on supporting children to remain living within their family when it is safe to do so, or in kinship arrangements. The challenge of securing in-house and commissioned foster homes is well described, and plans are in place to address the shortfall.
52. Bespoke health interventions are spot purchased to ensure a timely response to children's health needs. Leaders have prioritised mental health services for children looked after and young people leaving care. They have commissioned additional provision for them, because of a shortfall in local child and adolescent mental health provision.
53. A small number of children have had to be placed in unregistered children's homes because of a shortage of local registered provision. While this is not the local authority's preferred choice, children living in these unregistered homes benefit from robust management oversight to ensure that their needs are being met. Providers are encouraged to register with the regulator. An additional layer of assurance and scrutiny is provided by the placements team while it continues to search for placements in registered settings.

54. A learning culture is well embedded in children's services. The leadership team has responded successfully to the areas identified for improvement at previous inspections. External scrutiny is invited by leaders through collaboration with their partner in practice.
55. Lewisham has a comprehensive performance framework. Performance reports illustrate trends, what is working well, areas for improvement and success measures. Regular performance meetings enable leaders to review progress against key performance indicators and agreed priorities. Any emerging themes are promptly followed up by leaders, so they have a clear picture of what is happening for children.
56. A comprehensive and well-structured quality assurance practice audit tool is used to illicit information about the quality of social work practice. Stronger audits are collaborative and provide opportunities for practitioners to learn in the moment. Including more feedback from children and families would strengthen the quality of audits. Learning loops following quality assurance activity are well established, so practice is routinely informed by feedback.
57. In the main, panels to monitor and track children's plans are well developed and provide effective oversight, direction and support to social workers. Stronger panels provide clear timeframes for actions to progress children's plans. Leaders recognise that arrangements to track the progress of children's permanence plans are not currently effective and need further development.
58. Most social workers and family practitioners receive regular supervision in line with the local authority's policy. When it takes place regularly, supervision includes clear direction and action planning, and discussion about staff well-being. However, this is not consistently the case across all services.
59. Social workers describe manageable caseloads that enable them to work effectively with children and families. Intervention is strengthened by the work of skilled family practitioners.
60. The exemplary anti-racist practice networking and safe space platform has positively supported staff from black and global majority backgrounds. Black workers describe the platform as innovative. They told inspectors that they feel valued by having their diversity and aspirations for career progression recognised by leaders.
61. The implementation of the preferred practice model is informed by a comprehensive development programme. The practice model is well embedded in children's services, and social workers use it routinely to analyse risk and need. This informs effective safety and care planning.

62. Learning and development opportunities, as well as career progression pathways, are available to staff. Newly qualified social workers feel well supported, with opportunities to learn, develop and reflect on their practice through the effective assessed and supported year in employment programme.
63. Staff describe leaders as approachable, visible and supportive. Staff achievements are valued and celebrated by leaders in an annual awards ceremony.



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