

Inspection of Newham local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 18 to 29 July 2022

Lead inspector: Christine Kennet, Her Majesty's Inspector

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

Children in the London Borough of Newham receive good-quality services. Leaders and operational managers have supported frontline staff to significantly improve practice since the last inspection, when the overall effectiveness was judged to be inadequate. Leaders are ambitious in delivering effective help, care and protection for children. These improvements have been made within a challenging context, with a legacy of poor practice, the impact of COVID-19, the complexity of some children's needs and significant workforce challenges. A highly visible and permanent senior leadership team has brought stability and a transformation in engagement with partners, creating a determined 'one-council approach' to providing the services children need to thrive.

Leaders, managers and staff have worked unstintingly to drive change. An ambitious programme of development, including a new relationship-based model of practice, 'Newham Circles of Support,' a new social work academy and investment in a clinical team of social work-qualified systemic therapists, has greatly strengthened practice and created a positive culture of learning and development. Good corporate and political support has helped leaders create an environment where good social work can flourish. Partners describe a transparent, outward-facing organisation which welcomes external scrutiny to promote change. Strategic oversight has been highly effective in supporting vulnerable children. Leaders have increased the number of permanent staff through proactive approaches to recruitment and positive workforce

development. As a result, children have had fewer changes of social workers and caseloads are decreasing.

Newham is developing a more permanent, stable and motivated workforce, who are passionate about improving children's lives. Increasing morale and confidence across the workforce are reflected in creative and skilled social work. Children and young people's involvement in their care planning and their wider participation show they are also instrumental in changing practice and thinking.

While leaders know there is scope for further improvement in some areas, children are receiving effective services that are tailored to their individual needs and delivered by an increasingly stable and skilled workforce. This is making a difference to most children's lives.

What needs to improve?

- More robust planning and consistency of supervision to meet the needs of disabled children.
- Consistency in the offer of advocates for children.
- Records which explain decisions for 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless, and the clarity of plans made for them.
- Consistency of practice for care leavers, including their wider engagement and participation and engaging in preparation for leaving care.

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

1. Services for children who need help and protection in Newham are strong. Thresholds are understood by both external professionals and practitioners in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). Children receive a prompt service when they need it and at the right level to respond to their individual needs.
2. Children and families can easily access a range of early help services. The early help hub integrated into the MASH ensures that children who do not require statutory services get the right help when they need it.
3. There is an extensive offer of early help services, with parenting, befriending and emotional well-being support, and targeted activities for children of all ages. Early help assessments are thorough, clearly analysing families' strengths and areas where support is needed. Practitioners include children's views in their assessments. Risk is explicitly explored. When children's needs change, there are appropriate thresholds for step-up and step-down to the right level of service. Multi-agency teamwork draws support around children and their families. Strong preventative work, coordinated through a multi-agency panel, helps reduce risk for children who are vulnerable to exploitation.
4. Children and families benefit from intensive support delivered by the 'Families First' targeted early intervention service. Feedback from families is positive, and

this work is helping to reduce repeat referrals and avoid the need for child protection planning for some children.

5. Professionals have a good understanding of thresholds and concerns about children referred to the MASH are responded to quickly. Management oversight helps ensure that decisions are proportionate to the level of need and risk. Referral information is mostly clear. The importance of parental consent is well understood, and it is appropriately overridden if needed, although it is not always clear what agency checks parents or carers have agreed to. Professionals have access to a consultation phone line, where appropriate guidance is given to ensure children are safeguarded. The inspection team was sighted on findings from other ILACS inspections and noted how closely managers and practitioners in Newham are overseeing work following consultation, to ensure oversight is effective and recorded. When risks escalate for children, strategy meetings are held quickly and decisions are made about next steps.
6. Children receive a fast and highly effective response from the emergency duty team (EDT). The team can access and record directly onto the electronic system, ensuring information is shared quickly with the MASH and daytime teams. The EDT seeks children's views and records their interventions well. They appropriately liaise and hold strategy meetings with the police child investigation team. When children go missing from home or care, EDT records help to ensure return home interviews take place when children are found.
7. Despite a high turnover in the workforce, particularly during the early part of this year, there remains rigorous management oversight across all social work teams to ensure appropriate next steps are taken for children. Staffing investment has allowed caseloads to remain manageable and most children can form positive relationships with their workers. Children and families in Newham are from very diverse backgrounds, which brings specific challenges and increased complexity. Social workers have a comprehensive understanding of the range of risks children may face. They draw on a range of services to help those who are vulnerable to forced marriage, female genital mutilation, serious youth violence or exploitation. Families with no recourse to public funds receive a responsive service from social workers who take into consideration the complexity of children's circumstances and their needs.
8. Assessments are thorough and include past concerns and children's family histories. Children are seen quickly after being allocated to workers. Social workers are responsive to children's and families' individual needs and pressures, working with empathy, professional curiosity and persistence to engage them in the assessment process. They use tools to understand the impact on children of domestic abuse, mental ill-health or problems with substance misuse. A better offer of services, direct work with fathers and clinical support for systemic practice have improved the response to children's needs.
9. Disabled children benefit from social workers who know them well. Social workers thoughtfully include them in visits, assessments and plans, using a

range of methods to understand their worlds and capture their voices. Some children have had too many changes of social workers, hindering efforts to progress their plans effectively and improve their circumstances. Supervision is not happening frequently enough to prevent delay and help workers address concerns about parenting capacity for disabled children.

10. Children who are supported through child in need (CIN) or child protection (CP) plans receive a service consistent with their level of need and risk. When their circumstances or risks change, plans are appropriately escalated or stepped down to ensure they receive the correct level of service and support. Visits and observations of children are purposeful and give good insights into their world. Direct work with children, including very young children, is a strength. Social workers use age-appropriate tools to draw out children's views and wishes, to inform their planning, work with parents and ongoing risk assessments. The multi-agency CIN/CP panel highlights and reviews the progress and planning for children who have been on a plan for over 18 months, providing additional scrutiny to progress plans for children and challenge any delays.
11. Children benefit from appropriate and focused plans that result from well-chaired case conferences. Parents have opportunities to attend and share their views. Effective multi-agency information-sharing allows a clear overview of the impact of work undertaken with children. Mid-point reviews by case conference chairs ensure plans are driven forward. Some minutes and plans are written directly to children, to help them understand the decisions that are being made. However, this is not yet consistently embedded into all social work practice.
12. Effective legal and permanence planning meetings and rigorous tracking of children's cases in the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline (PLO) support timely decisions, prevent drift and ensure work progresses within suitable timescales for children in most cases. Increased risks are escalated swiftly and applications for proceedings made when needed. Much better letters before proceedings mean that families are clear about what is required. This has diverted a number of children from the need to go into court proceedings. Frontline managers are aware that further work is needed to simplify the language used.
13. Most 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless receive timely and proportionate help, including joint assessments with the housing department. Some children have refused to be accommodated under voluntary arrangements, although records do not always show why, and it is not clear what information children are given to help them make informed decisions. CIN plans are not being used in a consistent, effective way for children who are supported without a legal order.
14. Professionals identify exploitation risks for children well. The referral pathway is clear and statutory interventions are used appropriately when risks increase. A range of panels share intelligence and consider diversion and disruption tactics. Engagement with the right multi-agency partners is achieving a good, shared understanding of exploitation risks across the borough. Workers consider the

impact of past trauma and work together to deliver focused action and plans to safeguard children and young people.

15. Arrangements to investigate allegations against professionals are effective. Robust oversight through the local authority designated officer provides effective safeguards for children. Thorough recording ensures a clear audit trail of actions taken and what needs to happen next.
16. Children who are electively home educated and children missing from school benefit from a robust system managed and overseen together with the special educational needs service. Appropriate actions are taken when safeguarding issues are identified for these children.

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

17. Effective edge of care services and a strengthened early help offer are supporting change within families, enabling more children to remain living at home or to return home from care when it is safe for them to do so. When children need to be looked after, appropriate decisions and timely actions are taken to secure their safety. If children cannot live with their parents, simultaneous planning and effective family group conferences ensure early consideration of other family members, so that children remain within their family networks where possible. If adoption is identified as a possible route to permanence, there is timely and effective co-working with the regional adoption agency (Adopt London East). Matching for children is carefully considered.
18. Permanence planning has significantly improved since the last inspection. Stability for children in care is good. There is positive use of early permanence through foster-to-adopt when this is consistent with children's needs, and their journeys to permanence are tracked effectively with oversight from managers. Most children make good progress living with carers in the right home for them. However, problems with court availability and changes of social workers have meant that some children are not achieving legal permanence as early as possible. The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service reports that the quality of information presented to court by social workers has improved considerably in the last 12 months.
19. Newham's response to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) is a real strength. These children receive a timely, responsive service with good support that meets their diverse needs. Social workers are proactive and ensure that children can keep in contact with their families living abroad when possible.
20. Children are visited often and seen alone by social workers, who are proud of their progress and achievements. Visits are purposeful and children viewing their records will have a good understanding of the work undertaken with them and the decisions made about their lives. Records are detailed and show social workers purposefully engaging with children, observing them with their carers and listening to their views. Some records are written directly to children, sensitively capturing their views and wishes in an accessible format.

21. Some children in care have had too many changes of social workers, preventing them from establishing trusting relationships. While many have had better stability and a consistent social worker in recent months, previous changes have led to delays in progressing some children's care plans. Increasingly effective scrutiny from independent reviewing officers and better-quality supervision are helping to mitigate delays, so that progression of children's care plans is now improving.
22. Social workers advocate strongly for children's rights. However, not all children are offered advocacy support and if they decline an offer of advocacy, this decision is not reviewed or revisited with them.
23. Children's care plans are detailed and focus on achieving permanence. Plans are regularly reviewed and include children's hopes and aspirations. Children live with their brothers and sisters where possible. When this cannot be achieved, regular family activity time is arranged to ensure they keep in touch. Most children take part in a wide range of activities. They like their homes and they see their social workers often. Children's review meetings are sensitively recorded, minutes are child-focused and some are written directly to them.
24. Foster carers feel supported and part of the team that cares for children. A diverse training offer helps carers to meet the needs of the children they care for. Children's foster placements are stable, enabling them to form positive relationships and make good progress. Leaders are aware of the need to increase the number of carers available for children coming into care. A good range of recruitment activities and creative ways of extending carer approvals have led to initial progress towards ambitious targets set by leaders.
25. There are challenges identifying placements that can meet some children's complex needs; however, matching is effective for most children in care. Children's cultural needs are well understood and are carefully considered when identifying both short- and long-term placements. Ambitious plans are in place to enhance sufficiency, including a transformation of foster care, participation in the North East London Commissioning Partnership to increase residential capacity, and increasing accommodation options for care leavers.
26. Children's health needs are identified well. Health assessments are of good quality and focus on meeting all aspects of children's emotional well-being and physical health. They inform children's care plans. When children need support with their emotional health and well-being, they are promptly referred to child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), or other services are sourced as needed. CAMHS assess children's needs quickly and prioritise interventions, with reasonable wait times. Investment by leaders has established a clinical team who also support children's and families' therapeutic needs.
27. Not all children benefit from having timely information about their life story and journey through care. Social workers support children to understand their journeys through direct work, chronologies and life-story work; however this is not consistently taking place for all children. There have been improvements, although leaders are aware there is more to do.

28. Children at risk from any form of exploitation, including serious youth violence and risk of radicalisation, receive a strong and coordinated service, with an effective multi-agency response to mitigate harm. Social workers use screening tools appropriately to identify risks of exploitation. Children who go missing are consistently offered a return home interview. These interviews carefully consider risks to children and next steps needed. Strategy meetings are appropriately held when concerns about children escalate. This work supports a better understanding of developing risks for the child and the action required.
29. The virtual school is highly effective in supporting children's education and learning, whether they live in or outside of the borough. Children make good academic progress upon coming into care. Leaders and teachers play a key role in helping children in care and care leavers to succeed in their education and progression. Personal education plans are detailed and reflect high-quality conversations between the partners who support the child. Plans focus on children's individual educational, social and emotional well-being needs. They are well written and bespoke to individual children, and are supporting children to make good progress.
30. The corporate parenting strategy and local offer to care leavers were redeveloped and launched with the involvement of young people in autumn 2021. The Children in Care Council and young people's attendance at the corporate parenting meetings have been influential in the co-development of 'The Cove', a hub designed for young people where they can meet up, seek support and develop skills.
31. Enthusiastic and dedicated personal advisers work hard to keep in touch with care leavers and offer the support that they need, when they need it. This includes care leavers who are aged over 21. Workers are in meaningful contact with the vast majority of care leavers or are making determined efforts to re-establish contact. Young people are visited regularly in line with their needs by personal advisers who develop relationships with them and keep in regular contact by messaging, sometimes daily.
32. All young people have an up-to-date pathway plan which clearly represents their views and wishes. Personal advisers are dedicated to helping young people become independent and to achieve their goals and aspirations in life. They involve them fully in discussing their ambitions.
33. Children preparing to leave care are allocated personal advisers before turning 18. However, allocation and active joint working between personal advisers and social workers take place too late for some children. There is insufficient clarity as to the role and tasks to be undertaken by personal advisers when they are working with care leavers before their 18th birthday.
34. The health needs of care leavers, including their needs for emotional health support, are identified well in plans, and young people can access universal services easily, despite some being out of borough. Health histories are clear, informative and give young people an understanding of their immunisations and health needs, although not all young people receive their health history information in time before leaving care. The provision of a specialist emotional

health worker enhances support for care leavers, for example offering individual sessions to young people and consultations with personal advisers.

35. Planning for care leavers is focused on education, employment and training (EET) activities and encourages their involvement in seeking opportunities. This work is enhanced by a weekly EET panel and input from two specialist workers. Care leavers are provided with effective support to progress to university or apprenticeships. A high and increasing proportion of care leavers are in education, employment or training, with a high proportion progressing to university.
36. Young people report varying quality in their relationships with their personal advisers. Some really value the help and support they receive; they have positive relationships and they know their entitlements and how to ask for help. For others, changes of personal adviser have had a negative impact on their relationships and the information they receive about their entitlements.
37. Young people benefit from up-to-date risk assessments, which are mostly undertaken with them. These identify concerns and relevant actions to help reduce risks, particularly when care leavers have been in abusive domestic relationships. The 16-plus panel and risk management panels provide effective support for multi-agency planning for care leavers who have additional needs or are vulnerable to particular risks.
38. Most care leavers, including UASC and young people recently released from custody, are involved in choosing their accommodation. This is mostly suitable, taking into account their needs, risks and personal safety. Joint developments with housing are making available a further 30 new self-contained flats to support young people remaining in the borough. Leaders identified this need, sourced funding and mobilised plans, and the additional 30 flats will be available soon.

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

39. In early 2019, inspectors judged Newham local authority children's services to be inadequate. Since then, confident and ambitious leaders have worked tirelessly to bring about significant changes that have transformed services for children and their families. Children are now receiving good and effective help, protection and care that are making a significant difference to their lives. The highly effective senior leadership team, led by the director of children's services, has worked diligently to continuously strengthen the quality of practice, from what was a very low base. Leaders have brought stability and learning, accepted challenge and allowed positive engagement with partners to create a 'one-council approach' to delivering sustainable services, ensuring that Newham's most vulnerable children and families receive the support they need.
40. Newham experienced exceptional challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. The effects of COVID-19 impacted significantly on some communities, affecting many families and many council staff. Despite the increase in referrals following

the easing of lockdown, and the high level of need, leaders have continued to deliver an ambitious programme of change and improvement.

41. Leaders have shown a strong and mature approach to partnership working. Partners report transparent, highly positive and improved relationships with the local authority. Elected members and partners have demonstrated, through investment and support, their commitment to improving outcomes for cared-for and care-experienced children. The corporate parenting board ensures children's views are not only heard but also acted upon. The board has articulated clearly the areas in which it needs to increase its impact, such as the provision of housing for care leavers. The voice of children in care and care leavers has shaped the progress of services, for example through their involvement in creating 'The Cove', a new hub for care leavers where they can meet others, seek guidance and learn new skills. Scrutiny by and the support of the lead member and corporate parenting board have influenced improvements in service delivery for children and young people, including better health histories and developments in accommodation for care leavers.
42. Newham has introduced a systemic model of practice with children and families, 'Newham Circles of Support'. Staff have engaged positively with this relationship-based practice model, which is helping them to develop a clear rationale for intervention, to identify risks and to make plans for change. Leaders have invested in training and resources for social workers, including a clinical team of social work-qualified systemic therapists that supports practice by co-working cases and offering consultations, group supervisions and training. Children's records show how this model of practice is embedded across the service. Workers talk about reflective discussions which are effective in sharing ideas about progressing children's plans. These discussions are captured in supervision notes and are informing actions to effect change in families.
43. The creation of the social work academy is a real strength. It is providing a much-improved training and development offer to social workers. The importance of relationship-based social work is evident throughout the academy's work. The introduction of practice development social workers who offer coaching is supporting and enhancing social work practice.
44. Proactive approaches to recruitment and positive workforce development are enabling leaders to increase the number of permanent staff, with ambitious targets for further gains. Successful recruitment and additional funding to increase capacity in the assessment teams have reduced caseloads, so that social workers have more time to build trusting relationships with children.
45. Social workers are invested in and really enjoy working in Newham. They receive appropriate guidance and support from their managers and team members. They describe a highly visible senior leadership team who communicate with them. Some social workers give a compelling account of the improvement journey in the borough, strongly linking this to a positive change in culture in which they are held to account for the quality of the work, but also

saying they work for an organisation that cares about its workforce and respects the need for a sustainable approach to change.

46. Leaders have made significant progress in improving supervision for frontline staff. Supervision for most workers is now regular, detailed and reflective, with good analysis and consideration of all children's individual needs. Workers are helped to support children's progress by careful and considered reflection and planning. While further work is needed to strengthen the consistency of supervision in some teams, there is a substantial improvement from a low base at the last inspection.
47. Strategic oversight has been highly effective in safeguarding the most vulnerable children. Safeguarding risks are closely monitored through a variety of panels, including the multi-agency child exploitation panel that tracks and monitors effectively young people at risk of exploitation. Leaders have been proactive in implementing other tools, panels and trackers which have also strengthened oversight of progress and planning for children.
48. Planning for permanence has significantly improved since the last inspection. A revised policy and procedure are embedded in practice, with a clear pathway to ensure that permanence planning meetings track children's progress through the system. Management oversight, planning with social workers and close cooperation with the regional adoption agency are supporting matching and early permanence for children where this is appropriate.
49. Housing pressures and a transient population add to the challenges of ensuring sufficiency of local placements for children. Leaders have effective oversight of commissioning. They are seeking to increase provision through a number of different initiatives, although it is too early to evaluate their impact.
50. Leaders have embedded a comprehensive quality assurance system, supporting their oversight of children's experiences and progress. An extensive programme of practice-learning conversations, thematic audits, dip sampling, performance dashboards, and peer and national reviews underpin scrutiny of practice. There is evidence that audits support improvements in the quality of practice.
51. The chief executive, political leaders and the chair of the scrutiny committee exercise effective governance, holding senior leaders to account and challenging them through regular meetings on the progress of the authority's improvement plans.

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