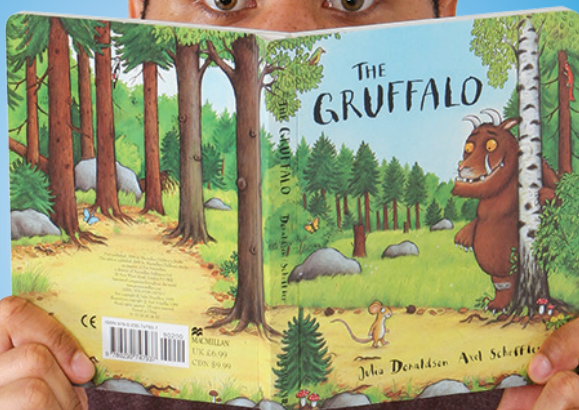


Lambeth:  
**Children  
at the Heart  
of Practice**

Lambeth's  
approach  
to children  
and family  
social work





## Introduction

In May 2015 Lambeth's Children's Social Care was judged by Ofsted to be inadequate and since then we have been on a rapid and exciting improvement journey. We have embarked on a process of change right across our children and family services. These changes aim to put social work practice right at the heart of everything we do.

We are focused on practice that builds relationships, enables and supports change for families, and promotes children's wellbeing and development. We believe we can achieve this by working with families and children openly and collaboratively. Our commitment to relationship-based social work extends to how we work with partners and providers, where we build effective professional working relationships that enable families to change and thrive.

Promoting and enabling the best life outcomes for children is what our **'Children at the heart of practice'** framework is all about.

# Summary of our approach

- We believe families are where children thrive and we support children to remain within their family wherever possible
- We are focused on the absolute priority to make it a safe journey for the children and families we work with
- We value the importance of direct social work and family support work with families as a means of enabling change
- We work openly with families and children to bring about change, building on strengths, so that parents and carers are able to provide good parenting, consistent boundaries and emotional warmth, allowing children to develop life skills and resilience
- We consider and respond to the diverse emotional, cultural and material needs of each child and their family
- We understand that building resilience and bringing about change in families who often face severe disadvantages, is difficult and challenging work. This requires skilled and confident social workers with good leadership and management, supervision and learning opportunities
- We are led by an inspirational and experienced leadership team including Mark Stancer, Director of Children's Social Care, Annie Hudson, Strategic Director and Andrew Christie, LSCB chair

- We have structured our service into small teams made up of six social workers, each with manageable caseloads of approximately 15 children per social worker
- We are committed to regular and effective supervision on a one to one basis as well as regular group supervision in each team
- We have put in place dedicated business support for each of the teams to free up social workers to spend more time with children and their families and advanced practitioners to co-work our most complex cases.

While our vision is clear and we have made significant progress, we know that there is still a long way to go. Our improvement journey will continue to be hard work, challenging and sometimes frustrating. But it will also continue to be incredibly rewarding for practitioners who want to focus on practice and who are excited by the opportunity to be part of our improvement journey working in one of the most diverse and dynamic boroughs in the country.



# What do we mean by 'Children at the heart of practice'?

Lambeth's 'Children at the heart of practice' sets out the vision and values that guide social work practice in Lambeth. It is not a prescriptive set of rules or procedures that deskill and disempower social workers. It is instead an underlying ethos to guide everything we do. Our framework is designed to be flexible so that it can work in a place as diverse as Lambeth where every family is different and what might be right for one family or child may not be right for another. It has been developed to support social workers to use their professional judgement and to spend their time undertaking relationship-based social work with children and families that truly transforms lives.

While we are clear about our framework and are confident the building blocks are in place, we know that we are not there yet. We believe our journey of improvement will take us two to three years to properly establish.

The role of a social worker is an incredibly difficult one, requiring a range of skills and a firm knowledge base. For us, putting children and families at the heart of practice is about ensuring our social workers:

- Work purposefully with a clear and constant focus on children's needs and experiences
- Understand the physical, social and emotional development of children and young people, and the context and circumstances of their lives (the wider system)

- Provide evidence-based interventions with families that improve children's lives in a timely and compassionate way
- Establish and maintain positive relationships with families and other professionals
- Have the skills and knowledge to complete high quality and effective assessments and plans. This includes having strong report writing skills and good analytic and communication skills. It requires an ability to reflect and make good use of supervision.

The rest of this booklet sets out what our 'Children at the heart of practice' model is and how we are making it a reality.

# Lambeth's Children at the Heart of Practice framework

Our heart of practice framework is made up of our vision, values, structure and how we practise. It is described below.

## Our vision

We provide the highest quality help and protection so children have good life outcomes and are protected from harm.

We execute our statutory responsibilities with compassion and care, keeping our interventions with families to a minimum.

## Our values and beliefs

We believe children are best cared for in their birth families and where this isn't possible we take timely and appropriate action so children have permanence and stability.

We work openly and collaboratively with parents and families understand why we are involved.

We treat everyone with dignity and respect.

## Our structure

We have

- Small teams
- Dedicated business support for each team
- Reduced management layers
- Regular group supervision.

## Our practice

Lambeth Social Workers:

- Are curious, sensitive, and reflective as well as being authoritative, professional and tenacious in improving life outcomes for children
- Approach families with empathy, compassion and creativity using relationships for positive change
- Use a systemic approach to work purposefully, openly and compassionately with the whole family system
- Use reflective critical thinking and analysis to evaluate and integrate multiple sources of knowledge and evidence to create meaningful assessments and plans
- Build skilful and influential working relationships with other professionals and agencies
- Draw on a range of approaches, used proportionately and regularly reviewed
- Make good and emotionally intelligent use of supervision
- Have high quality planning and decision making skills
- Demonstrate understanding and skill in working as a member of a team and organisation
- Understand their legal and statutory responsibilities and execute these in children's best interests
- Take appropriate responsibility for their conduct, practice and learning.

The rest of this booklet describes how we are making our 'Children at the heart of practice' a reality through taking a systemic approach, developing the skills of our social workers and having a strong career development offer so that our staff can achieve their full potential.



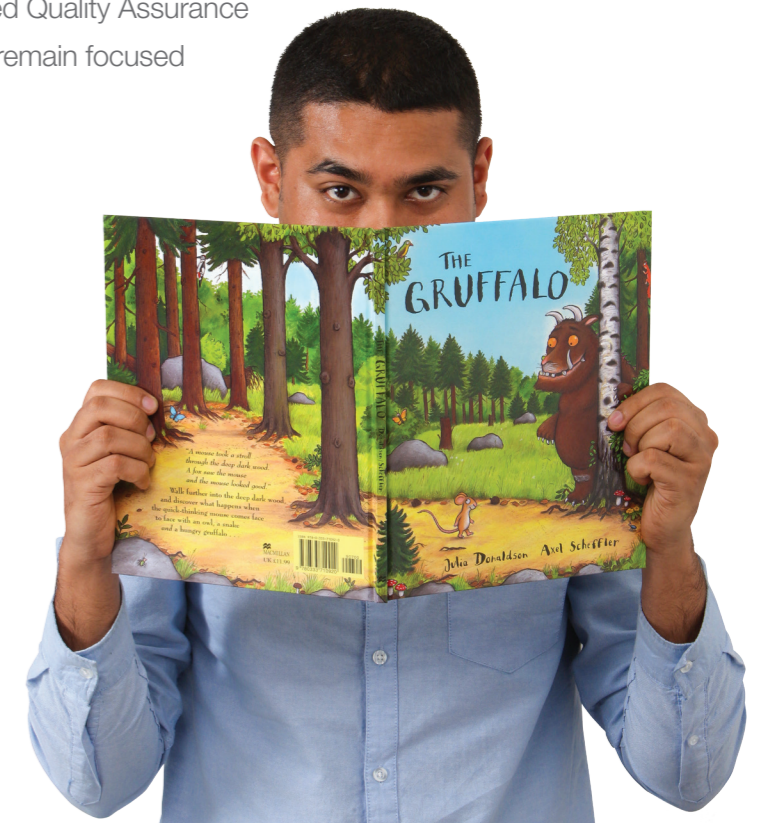
## What methodologies do we use in our 'Children at the heart of practice' framework?

- We have adopted Systemic Theory and methodologies as our overarching practice approach. We believe this is the best approach to work together with families struggling with complex problems and fits with our core values that children are best cared for by their family wherever this is possible. In addition to being aligned with our values there is also compelling evidence about the impact of systemic social work practice in delivering outcomes for children (Forrester et al. 2000 and Munro et al. 2010).
- We use Signs of Safety to organise, articulate and structure our work with children and families. In Lambeth Signs of Safety forms the basis for child protection conferences, child and family assessments and case supervision.
- We use Brief Solution-Focused interventions to help families focus on their goals and make tangible changes swiftly.
- Specialist assessment tools are skilfully and thoughtfully used with the small number of families where there are high levels of concern, danger and complexity; and in which statutory and court processes are required to help us intervene to keep children safe. These specialist tools include PAMS and The Graded Care Profile.

# How are social workers supported to work within our 'Children at the heart of practice' framework?

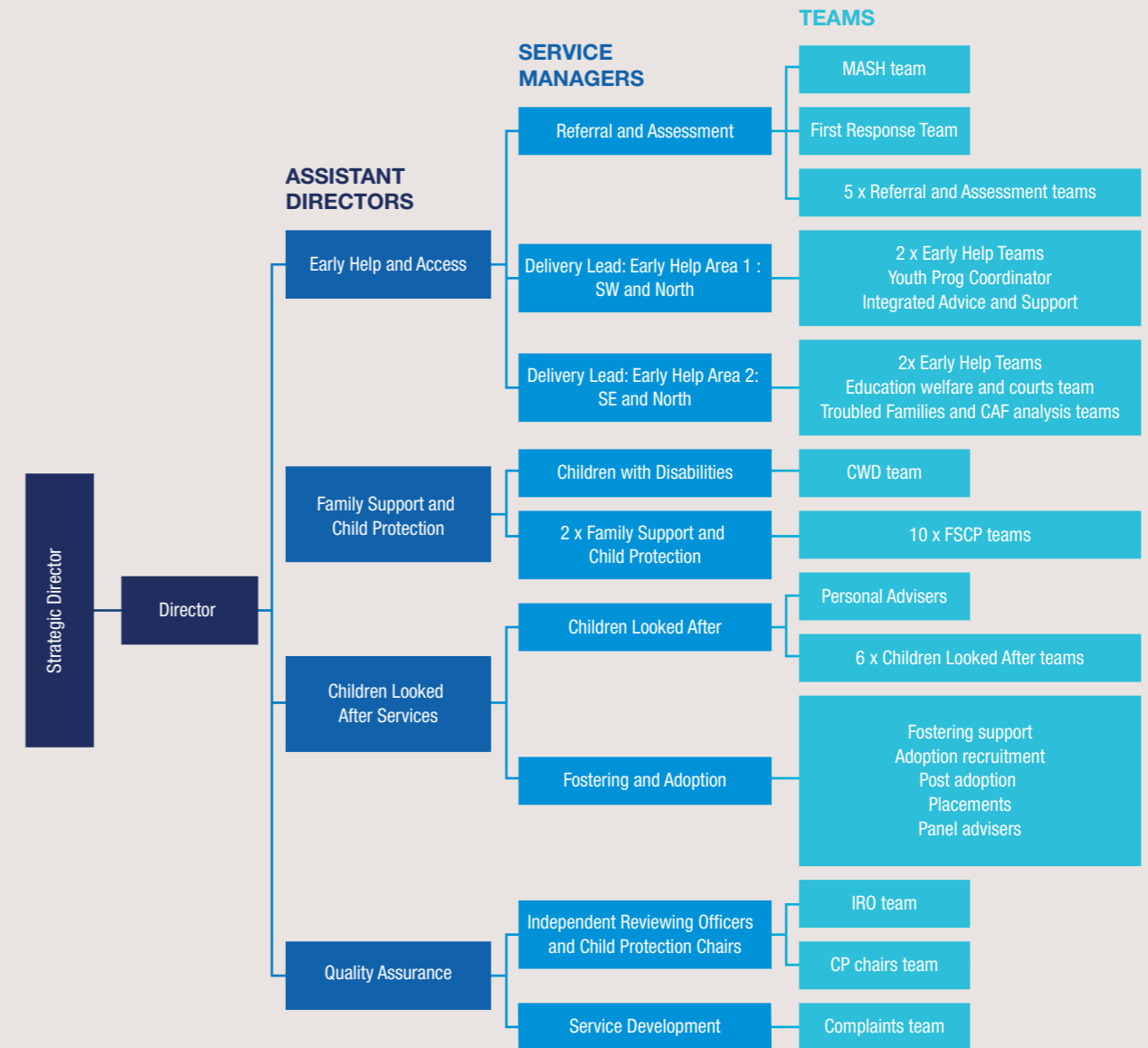
- We expect our social workers to have the practice expertise to be able to assess and identify what needs to change and offer supportive, creative and effective interventions that help families solve their problems, enabling children to live safely at home. When this is not possible, our social workers take timely and appropriate decisions to ensure children are safe and there is permanence in alternative care arrangements
- Above all we expect our social workers to have the confidence and skill to judge when and how to apply different approaches and interventions; and when it is more appropriate to draw on Lambeth's wealth of community based support services as opposed to a social work intervention
- In Lambeth we support our social workers to both understand the methods (described above) and have the confidence and skills to know when to apply them in a range of ways:
  - Social workers are trained and supported in the core methods described above (Systemic theory and methodologies, Signs of Safety, Attachment and Resilience Theory (including Brief-solution-focused therapy) and social workers working in specific areas of specialist practice are trained in PAMs and the Graded Care Profile);
  - our advanced practitioners provide hands-on support and guidance to help social workers reflect on the most appropriate interventions;

- there is regular team-based group supervision as well as individual supervision which allows social workers the time and space to reflect on their casework;
- Quarterly practice weeks are designed to give senior managers the opportunity to spend time in 'hands-on' review and support on cases; and
- Regular performance clinics, and an ongoing audit programme are in place through an enhanced Quality Assurance Framework to ensure we remain focused on practice quality.



# How have we structured our service?

- Our social work teams are small (six social workers and a team manager) to enable regular group supervision, manageable caseloads and hands-on support and guidance
- Each team is supported by a dedicated business support officer to ensure social workers are spending their time on things only a qualified social worker can do
- We have experienced advanced practitioners throughout the service who co-work our most complex cases and provide hands-on support and guidance to others
- There are just over 300 posts and 29 teams of social workers covering Referral and Assessment (including the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub), Family Support and Child Protection, Children Looked After (CLA), Leaving Care, Children with Disabilities, and Quality Assurance.







## What about career development?

We are committed to developing our staff and Lambeth is a great place to make a career. There are staff here who have worked their way up from social workers to advanced practitioners, team managers and service managers. However, for us, career progression is not just about 'moving up' and into management but also continuous development to improve and develop better practice skills with families.

In addition to the training in the social work methods outlined above, we have introduced a management training programme and are shortly joining Firstline, the new national management support programme for first line social work managers.

There are structured opportunities for career progression in place. Newly qualified social workers automatically progress (after concluding their professional qualifications) to become social workers, and there are twice yearly progression panels for social workers and business support officers to increase their salary by up to £4,000 as they meet the requirements of more skilled workers.

# About Lambeth

- Lambeth is one of the most diverse boroughs in the country with over 130 different languages spoken
- The borough stretches from Waterloo and the Southbank in the north to Clapham, Brixton and Stockwell in the centre and down to Streatham and Norwood in the south
- There are currently (September 2016) 426 children in care, 265 children with a child protection plan. In 2015/16 30 children were adopted. 332 of our children in care are from BME backgrounds, 244 are boys, 182 are girls
- Each month there are around 1,200 contacts to the service.

If you agree that practice is the heart of good social work and children are at the heart of practice, come and join us, be part of the journey!

# London Borough of Lambeth



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