

Routes out of inadequacy

What next for inadequate authorities?

By Mark Stancer, Director of Children’s Social Care, Lambeth

Lambeth’s Children’s Services were found to be inadequate by Ofsted in 2015. For the London borough judged to be outstanding in 2012 it was a big fall from grace.

Over that same three year period there were also many changes in the land of Ofsted. They are now, rightly, focused on outcomes for children, not over-prepped social workers and performance targets that can easily mask poor quality social work practice.

But where does that leave Lambeth and the growing band of authorities (nearly one in four) judged to be inadequate?

The 2016 [research by the LGA](#) strikes a real note and we concur with their findings that to turn things around, the most important things to get right are strategy, leadership and governance.



We have also learned through our own inadequate judgement (and as found in [research by iMPower](#)), that being judged as failing can hinder as much as it helps an improvement journey. In an already competitive market like London when you are judged as failing it is even harder to recruit and retain good quality permanent staff. Being judged inadequate makes it more difficult to boost morale, shine a light on the things that are going well and to change systems. People feel browbeaten and broken, disheartened and lacking the motivation to do what (even in an outstanding authority) is one of the most difficult jobs in the country.

Our response in Lambeth hasn't been to paper over the cracks and try to respond to each of Ofsted's recommendations line by line. We've largely followed the LGA approach. We have stepped back, stopped, and really thought about the root causes of our service failure. We have sought, and been backed, by our politicians and we've worked closely with the improvement partners provided by the Department for Education to develop a clear strategy which we are implementing with absolute precision and commitment.

We have drawn in excellent and credible leadership. I am fortunate to be able to draw on the experience of Annie Hudson, the ex-Chief Executive of The College of Social Work and now Lambeth's Strategic Director, and Andrew Christie the former DCS of the Tri-borough who in May 2016 was appointed as Lambeth's LSCB chair. Together they ensure we remain realistic and pursue our strategy with pace.

For us the solution is not introducing more 'top down management' and more 'prescriptiveness'. We recognise that approach only leads to social workers feeling forced to blindly following process, feeling disempowered and deskilled.

Instead we've developed an ambitious and exciting practice framework that will get social workers back to the core reason they came into the profession in the first place – to focus on high quality, transformative social work practice. We've called our approach '[Children at the heart of practice](#)'.

It isn't a set of rules, but an overarching ethos and a strong set of values which guide our practice. We are getting back to some of the basics that really enable social workers – small teams, dedicated business support in each team, a strong cohort of advanced practitioners who can guide and support our higher than average numbers of newly qualified social workers, and above all a focus on relationship-based, systemic social work practice.

There is a long way to go, and we are realistic about how long it will take us to truly embed the changes. However, it is an exciting time for Lambeth, we believe this is the right thing to do for children and families, the right thing to do to turnaround our services and we are confident that in a few years other inadequate authorities will be following our lead.

To find out more about Lambeth's approach and to hear from Mark Stancer Lambeth's Director of Children's Social Care, Annie Hudson Lambeth's Strategic Director for Children, Steve Goodman- the Chief Executive of Morning Lane Associates and Professor David Shemmings about the future of Children's Social Work practice [please book your free place](#) to attend the after work conference on the Southbank on Wednesday October 12.