

Brent

Inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers

and

Review of the effectiveness of the Local Safeguarding Children Board¹

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Children's services in Brent require improvement to be good
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1. Children who need help and protection	Requires improvement
2. Children looked after and achieving permanence	Requires improvement
2.1 Adoption performance	Good
2.2 Experiences and progress of care leavers	Requires improvement
3. Leadership, management and governance	Requires improvement

¹ Ofsted produces this report under its power to combine reports in accordance with section 152 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. This report includes the report of the inspection of local authority functions carried out under section 136 of the Education and Inspection Act 2006 and the report of the review of the Local Safeguarding Children Board carried out under the Local Safeguarding Children Boards (Review) Regulations 2013.

Executive summary

Children's services in Brent require improvement to be good. Although strong and focused leadership has led to the achievement of a number of important improvements in the quality of services, the local authority is not yet delivering consistently good services for children and young people. Inspectors found no serious or widespread concerns but significant areas for development remain.

Improvements achieved since the last inspections of child protection services and safeguarding and children looked after services in 2012 and 2011 include: improved assessments and a stronger focus on the voice of the child; manageable caseloads, increasing the amount of time social workers spend with children; a significantly improved focus on assessing and meeting the health needs of children looked after; and a strengthened adoption service.

The Brent Family Front Door effectively assesses and responds to risk for children who may be in need, or at risk of significant harm. Some children who may benefit from early help services experience delay in having their needs assessed and met. Not all agencies are fully engaged in this process. When the Signs of Safety approach is used, assessments are mostly good. Where it is not used, they lack full information, analysis and a clear focus on children's wishes and feelings. The local authority has a range of assessment tools to assess risk in specific circumstances, such as domestic violence or risk of sexual exploitation, but these are not routinely used to inform understanding of the risk for individual children. The impact of diversity factors such as culture, religion and language is not always well considered in assessments where this may have a bearing on children's needs.

Services for disabled children in Brent are effective. Good integration between children's and adult's services ensures that disabled young people experience a well-managed transition to adult services. The local authority's Ade Adepitan short breaks centre for disabled children and young people has been judged outstanding in a recent inspection.

Progress has been made to tackle child sexual exploitation. Extensive training and awareness raising have taken place including the presentation of the drama 'Chelsea's Choice' in schools. There has been training to raise awareness for over 100 licenced drivers and briefing visits to all local hotels. Good work with the police has included the identification of local 'hot spots' and the issuing of abduction notices in cases of concern. The authority recognises that further work is required. Agencies have agreed funding for a data analyst, although the post is not yet filled. A planned contract for therapeutic support is not yet in place and work is ongoing to embed the use of the child sexual exploitation assessment tool. Work with children and young people who have been missing from home or care is not good enough and is not well integrated with work to tackle child sexual exploitation.

Decisions to take children into care in Brent are appropriate. The local authority has achieved significant and sustained improvements in the duration of care proceedings, which have more than halved in length over the last year. This means that children

and young people can move into permanent homes with carers or return to their families more quickly. Similar improvements have been achieved in adoption timescales. Adoption is considered early for all children who may benefit from it.

Although the stability of placements for children looked after in Brent is improving, it is still below the average for similar councils. There is insufficient capacity across the range of placement options to ensure that the needs of all children and young people are met. Initial decisions to place children out of area are not always made at the right level of seniority.

The quality of plans is not yet consistently good. A minority of care plans and pathway plans and a majority of personal education plans lack clarity, detail or timescales. Actions implemented by the head of the virtual school have improved attainment at Key Stage 1 in 2013–14 and at Key Stage 2 in 2014–15 but are yet to improve attainment across all key stages.

While aspects of provision to care leavers are well developed, and the number entering higher education is relatively high, too few take up high-quality apprenticeships.

Performance management and quality assurance systems are under-developed. They are not well joined up or used effectively to drive up performance. The local authority scrutiny committee lacks sufficient focus on children's social care. It has not identified areas for development and does not drive or track service improvement.

Although there are good individual examples of the local authority listening to and acting on the views of children and young people, for example by involving young people in the re-commissioning of semi-independent accommodation for care leavers, they do not systematically gather or analyse feedback from children and young people. Information from complaints, return home interviews, advocacy and other sources is not collated, analysed and used alongside performance and quality assurance information to help understand how services could be improved. This is a missed opportunity.

The local authority has worked hard over the last year to improve communication and support to schools. Similarly, close working with the police ensures that work to counter the risks posed to young people by radicalisation is effective and integrated into the broader range of services for families. However, there is a lack of strategic cohesion between agencies. The Joint Strategic Needs Analysis lacks focus on the social care needs of children. The Health and Wellbeing Board has not provided effective coordination and there is no current shared plan or framework that sets out how agencies will provide services against agreed priorities or how impact will be measured. The new Children's Trust, although developing fast and increasingly providing a focus for agencies to discuss services for children and young people, is still at too early a stage to have had a significant impact on improving the targeting, coordination and effectiveness of services for children, young people and their families.

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The local authority

Information about this local authority area²

Previous Ofsted inspections

- The local authority operates one children's home. This was judged to be outstanding at its most recent Ofsted inspection.
- The previous inspection of the local authority's safeguarding arrangements was in October 2012. The local authority was judged to be adequate.
- The previous inspection of the local authority's services for children looked after was in October 2011. The local authority was judged to be adequate.

Local leadership

- The Director of Children's Services (DCS) has been in post since April 2014.
- The chair of the LSCB has been in post since June 2015.

Children living in this area

- Approximately 70,000 children and young people under the age of 18 years live in Brent. This is 23% of the total population in the area.
- Approximately 29% of the local authority's children are living in poverty.
- The proportion of children entitled to free school meals:
 - in primary schools is 16% (the national average is 16%)
 - in secondary schools is 14% (the national average is 14%)
- Children and young people from minority ethnic groups account for 75% of all children living in the area compared with 22% in the country as a whole.
- The largest minority ethnic groups of children and young people in the area are Asian/Asian British and Black African.
- The proportion of children and young people with English as an additional language:
 - in primary schools is 68% (the national average is 19%).
 - in secondary schools is 57% (the national average is 15%).

² The local authority was given the opportunity to review this section of the report and has updated it with local unvalidated data where this was available.

Child protection in this area

- At 31 March 2015, 1,934 children had been identified through assessment as being formally in need of a specialist children's service. This is an increase from 1,413 at 31 March 2014.
- At 31 March 2015, 226 children and young people were the subject of a child protection plan. This is a reduction from 229 at 31 March 2014.
- At 31 March 2015, eight children lived in a privately arranged fostering placement. This is the same number of children as at 31 March 2014.
- Since the last inspection, five serious incident notifications have been submitted to Ofsted and three serious case reviews have been completed or were ongoing at the time of the inspection.

Children looked after in this area

- At 31 March 2015, 323 children were being looked after by the local authority (a rate of 46 per 10,000 children). This is a reduction from 350 (50 per 10,000 children) at 31 March 2014. Of this number:
 - 190 (or 59%) live outside the local authority area
 - 25 live in residential children's homes, of whom 88% live out of the authority area
 - five live in residential special schools,³ all of whom live out of the authority area
 - 244 live with foster families, of whom 53% live out of the authority area
 - nine live with parents, of whom 22% live out of the authority area
 - 46 children are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- In the last 12 months:
 - there have been 12 adoptions
 - 30 children became subject of special guardianship orders
 - 265 children ceased to be looked after, of whom 3% subsequently returned to be looked after
 - 29 children and young people ceased to be looked after and moved on to independent living
 - 23 children and young people ceased to be looked after and are now living in houses of multiple occupation.

³ These are residential special schools that look after children for 295 days or less per year.

Recommendations

1. Improve performance management and quality assurance mechanisms so that they are better aligned with each other, informed by feedback from children and families and used more effectively to improve the quality of services (paragraphs 102, 103).
2. Improve governance arrangements so that the local authority's scrutiny committee focuses more closely on children's social care and provides robust challenge that contributes to service improvement (paragraph 93).
3. Work with schools and other partners to ensure that children and their families do not experience delays in receiving early help (paragraph 13).
4. Take action to improve assessments, including those using specialist tools, so that they consistently meet the good standards seen in some, with good analysis and an understanding of the child's identity, wishes and feelings (paragraphs 18, 19, 23, 27, 28, 30).
5. Ensure that children's plans, including personal education plans and pathway plans, contain clear and specific actions with timescales for completion (paragraphs 32, 37, 48, 62, 79).
6. Ensure that children's assessments and plans are regularly revised to reflect changing circumstances so that interventions are in line with current needs (paragraphs 18, 62).
7. Ensure that approvals of out of borough placements for children by senior managers are taken in line with statutory guidance and that timely and sufficient consideration and scrutiny is given to the making of such placements (paragraph 55).
8. Strengthen consideration of the culture, religion and language of children and their families and of other factors that reflect the diverse nature of the community in Brent. This includes ensuring that translators are available when needed to avoid delay in assessing children's needs (paragraphs 28, 65).
9. Ensure that children who go missing are offered an interview with an independent person on their return; that information from these interviews is analysed to inform responses for individual children and the child population of Brent; and that this work is integrated with work to protect children at risk of sexual exploitation (paragraphs 45,100).
10. Concentrate the work of the virtual school on measures to narrow the attainment gap across all key stages to build on the success achieved at Key Stage 1 in 2013–14 and at Key Stage 2 in 2014–15 (paragraph 48).

11. Work closely with training providers and careers advice and guidance workers to increase care leaver progression into apprenticeships and other vocational further education (paragraph 85).

Summary for children and young people

- The council has made improvements to services for children but is still not meeting the needs of all children in Brent well enough. Managers in the council understand what they are already doing well and what they need to do better. They are working hard to improve further.
- Most children get help from social workers quickly, particularly if it is urgent. For a few children it takes a little longer and inspectors have told the council that they need to get help to all children quickly.
- Managers make sure that social workers in Brent have enough time to spend talking to children and young people so they understand what they need to do to help.
- There have been improvements in the services for children who need to be looked after but some children and young people still have several changes in their social worker. Inspectors found that some plans did not properly explain what needed to happen to make things better for the children and young people who are in care.
- The local authority does not yet make sure that all children and young people who go missing have a return interview by someone who is independent. The information from these interviews is not always used to make sure children and young people receive the support they need and to make it less likely they will go missing again.
- Managers have worked hard to develop ways to help understand risks to children and young people, for example if they are involved with gangs or at risk of sexual exploitation. Social workers do not always use these ways and so children and young people's plans are not as helpful as they could be in protecting them from harm.
- Care leavers receive regular support but not all of them find their plans useful. Managers know they need to do better at this. Personal advisers work hard to make sure care leavers have suitable accommodation. Many go on to higher education but not enough have opportunities to train through apprenticeships.
- There are not always enough council approved foster carers in Brent to help and support children with brothers and sisters who may need to be in care together or for older children.
- Social workers work hard to find adoptive families for children who need them and, because of this, there are no children waiting to be adopted in Brent.
- The Local Children Safeguarding Board is made up of organisations who work together to organise the protection of children in Brent. The Board needs to be better at finding out which services are improving things for children. It can then help organisations to work together in a better way and ensure that children are protected.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection

Requires improvement

Summary

Brent Family Solutions Service (BFSS) provides a wide range of coordinated early help services. There is, however, a lack of timeliness in completing and reviewing assessments using the Common Assessment Framework (CAF). This, coupled with a historic reluctance from some agencies to fully engage in the process, means that some children’s needs are not met at the first opportunity.

The Brent Family Front Door (BFFD) is a multi-agency safeguarding hub that is effective in identifying, assessing and responding to risk. The robust prioritisation of referrals ensures that children who are most at risk receive a timely and appropriate response. Accordingly, children and young people are protected well. Partner agencies understand the thresholds within the borough and this leads to appropriate and timely referrals.

The quality and timeliness of completion of child and family assessments (CFAs) is variable, with too many requiring improvement. Poorer assessments lack a thorough consideration of the individual needs of all children. In such cases the quality of plans and planning is inconsistent with some lacking clarity or timescales for the completion of actions.

In the better assessments seen by inspectors, the Signs of Safety (SoS) approach is having a positive impact. In such assessments the child’s voice is strongly evident and their wishes and feelings captured to inform assessments and planning. The introduction and use of the SoS approach has led to professionals across agencies working more effectively with children and their families.

The impact of the culture, religion and language of children and their families, or of other characteristics that reflect the diverse nature of the community in Brent, is often not considered well enough in assessments where this would be relevant.

The local authority has a number of assessment tools designed to assess specific concerns, including domestic abuse and child sexual exploitation. However, the use of these tools is not yet well embedded and social workers do not routinely use them to inform assessments of risk.

Manageable caseloads allow social workers to spend more time with children and are starting to support stronger relationships with children and families, leading to more effective interventions. Good management oversight of cases, including mid-way reviews, identifies progress against actions in most cases. This is not routinely followed through in all subsequent case management supervision so progress is not always effectively captured.

Inspection findings

12. Integrated early help services sit in locality teams, with some co-located within children's centres. An aligned services team, funded by partner agencies, co-work children's cases providing additional support, for example an independent domestic violence advocate (IDVA). The early help team receives referrals through the BFFD. This results in the majority of families receiving the appropriate level of intervention.
13. Despite work to engage partners in the CAF process and in undertaking the role of lead professional, the number of CAFs undertaken by partner agencies remains low, with schools only completing 9% of CAFs in 2014–15. As a result, children do not benefit consistently from timely CAF assessments and reviews and this means they do not always receive the services they need to meet their needs when they need them.
14. The Troubled Families programme sits within the package of early help services but staff work with families at all levels of need. Brent improved outcomes for all 810 of its identified families between April 2012 and May 2015, demonstrating improved employment, reduced criminal activity, improved educational engagement and reduced anti-social behaviour.
15. There is good involvement by families in early help services offered by children's centres, which provide a comprehensive range of services to meet identified needs. Children's centres family support workers receive case supervision from the early help team using the SoS model. Established partnerships with health deliver a good range of early help services.
16. The BFFD effectively assesses and responds to risk. Multi-agency information sharing ensures that risk analysis is appropriate and decisions robust. Clearly understood thresholds of need, applied by partners, lead to appropriate referrals. Properly prioritised work ensures that children most at risk receive a timely and appropriate response.
17. Brent is one of 10 local authorities implementing the SoS approach as part of the government's 'Innovations programme'. Where this approach is being used in the BFFD, improved information gathering is leading to a better quality of assessments and engagement with children and families. For disabled children, referrals routed via the BFFD are managed by an effective duty rota system. This ensures that children and their families benefit from a robust, responsive child centred service from appropriately experienced social workers. Disabled young people aged over 14 years, who transfer to adult services, continue to receive robust interventions.
18. Child protection enquiries are thorough, timely and informed by decisions in child protection strategy discussions. All child protection conferences lead to a plan to address children's identified needs, whether or not a child or young person becomes the subject of a formal child protection plan. CFAs are

increasingly timely and most are completed within a timescale that is right for each individual child's needs. Chronologies of significant events that have happened in children's lives are kept up to date and, in the main, children's histories are considered and used to inform assessments of risk. However, these assessments are not routinely updated to reflect such changes and despite the positive impact of the introduction of SoS, there remains some variation in the quality and use of the information gathered.

19. In good assessments, the signs of SoS approach is strongly evident and the wishes and feelings of children are actively explored. This informs the assessments and is reflected in plans. Safety goals, although broad, result in clear specific measurable actions leading to improved outcomes for children. No CFAs seen by inspectors were inadequate. Most were good, but some lacked a thorough consideration of the individual needs of children, particularly those with brothers and sisters.
20. Children are seen alone where appropriate. There is effective use of child-centred techniques in direct work with children, for example 'feeling's monopoly' with teenagers and 'happy/sad house' and 'worry tree' for younger children. The recently introduced 'Outcomes star' used by workers in BFSS effectively captures the wishes and feelings of children but is not yet being consistently used. The use of independent advocates for children who are not looked after is not routinely considered. Where it has been used, for example in the cases of two pregnant teenagers, for whom it was effective in supporting them to make their views and wishes for their unborn babies clear, it has had a positive impact on ensuring that the voices of children and young people are heard. The work of the disabled children's team is creative; the voices of children are sought and brought out using a range of non-verbal techniques.
21. Multi-agency engagement, in particular from health, in the assessment of risk and contribution to child protection plans is good. Participating in SoS results in partners being more effectively engaged and demonstrating greater responsibility and accountability for children's progress.
22. Young people at risk of radicalisation, forced marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM) are protected. In the majority of cases, early identification of risks leads to proactive and immediate safeguarding of young people supported by a well-organised multi-agency response. Proactive work by the police and the use of legal orders has effectively responded to immediate concerns and reduced the risk of radicalisation and forced marriage by ensuring that families remain in this country and that their activities are appropriately monitored. Maternity services provided by the London North West Healthcare NHS Trust include a specific clinic for women subjected to FGM. Their policy of referring to BFFD if women fail to attend two appointments has resulted in the early identification of risk to children.
23. The local authority has a number of specialist risk assessment tools designed to help social workers assess the risk to children from some particular concerns,

including child sexual exploitation, gang affiliation and domestic abuse. However, their use is inconsistent and their impact variable. Some are used as a tick box exercise and have little impact, while others are used more fully, resulting in effective risk reduction and support to children and young people. In relation to domestic abuse, a comprehensive risk assessment tool and extensive guidance are available for use with perpetrators but are rarely used. Risks are being identified and addressed in assessments but the use of these specialist assessment tools is not consistent and their impact is limited.

24. Since the Ofsted child sexual exploitation thematic inspection in November 2014, in which Brent participated, inspectors found improvements in safeguarding children from the risks associated with going missing and sexual exploitation. There are increasing numbers of appropriate referrals to the missing and multi-agency sexual exploitation (MASE) panels both in and out of the borough. Practice is not yet consistent for return home interviews. Where children are receiving an early intervention service, the lack of timeliness in completing CAFs means that their return interviews, when carried out, are not always fully informing plans for children and therefore there is delay in addressing risk.
25. The monitoring of children missing education is thorough. Educational welfare officers work closely with schools, visiting weekly or bi-weekly, to monitor attendance and support schools to implement their behaviour and attendance strategies. The local authority provides schools and parents with a good range of leaflets and guidance covering aspects such as elective home education, unauthorised absence from schools, school attendance, exclusion and education penalty notices. School attendance is closely monitored and showing a three year improving trend from 90% in 2012/13 to 92% in 2014/15.
26. A domestic abuse prevention service, newly commissioned in December 2014, has appointed an IDVA and a multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC) coordinator. The IDVA screens all referrals and, as a result, children are receiving a more timely service, normally within four weeks. The MARAC coordinator is providing consistent representation at the steering group and provides training to social workers about the use of the risk assessment checklist, criteria for referral and basic awareness raising. The impact of these new initiatives is not yet evident. Multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPAs) work well.
27. Research and theory based methodology do not underpin analysis strongly enough, particularly where neglect is an important feature. Of the 232 children on child protection plans, neglect is the main risk for 132 (57%) of them. Effective and consistent consideration of the impact of the 'toxic trio' of domestic abuse, drug, alcohol and substance abuse and parental mental ill health in presenting need is not prominent enough in assessments.
28. Brent has one of the highest proportions of ethnic minority residents in London. Children and young people from minority ethnic groups account for 75% of all

children living in the area compared with 22% in the country as a whole. The proportion of children and young people with English as an additional language in primary schools is 68% (the national average is 19%) and in secondary schools is 57% (the national average is 15%). Despite this, consideration of how these elements of diversity may have an impact on children's needs is not always present in assessments where this should be considered. Social workers spoken to by inspectors could usually explain how this was part of their thinking and analysis but their case recording does not routinely show this.

29. At the time of the inspection, the local authority's data recorded that they were working with 555 children in need, which is significantly lower than the 1,413 reported as at 31 March 2014. This recording of low numbers of children in need is due to the practice of only counting the electronic case files of the youngest, or most in need child in a family, rather than those of all the children in the family that the local authority is working with. This practice followed a change of electronic case recording system. This has resulted in the local authority being unable to assure themselves that the individual needs and risks of all brothers or sisters in a family are consistently met. Changes to the electronic case recording system to address this problem are planned but not yet in place.
30. Escalation of concern generally leads to an appropriate and proportionate response to risk when cases are 'stepped up' from child in need to child protection. However, in a minority of cases, the rationale for moving from child in need to child protection is not clearly recorded. Without a clear identification of the main presenting concerns it is more difficult for assessments to consider the main risks to a child and to identify the actions most likely to make a positive difference for them.
31. At the time of the inspection, 232 children were subject of child protection plans, of which 38 (16%) were second or subsequent plans. In all of the cases seen by inspectors, decisions to make children the subject of child protection plan were appropriate. Effective review mechanisms and oversight by the head of service has resulted in no children or young people being subject to a child protection plan for over two years.
32. The step down from child protection to child in need is both timely and appropriate for almost all children and young people. However, the robustness of plans is not consistent, actions are not always clear, specific and given a timescale for completion. This means that in most cases it is difficult to evidence what progress has been made. In some cases, where there has been a step down to early help, active co-working between social workers and BFFS provides continuity of relationships for families.
33. SoS is used in core groups and case conferences. This enables children and family members to engage better with professionals and understand the seriousness of concerns. In one example of best practice, good support and engagement by the social worker and a specialist teenage pregnancy midwife

enabled a very young mother to express her wishes and plan for her unborn baby to have a permanent family through adoption as soon as possible. However, this is not a consistent picture across the service: not all children, young people or parents benefit from such a focussed approach to understanding their wishes and feelings. The local authority does well at making sure it works with fathers, stepfathers, and wider family members and not just mothers. This means that social workers do better at understanding both the strengths and the difficulties within a family that make a difference to how quickly and successfully a child's welfare can be improved.

34. Children and young people are not routinely invited to conferences or reviews. The chairs of child protection case conferences report that social workers appropriately prepare children before meetings but that attendance should be better. Feedback from young people does not sufficiently inform the development of practice, as a process for systematically collecting their views is not in place.
35. Recent changes in the commissioning of interpreting services have affected the reliability of interpreters attending conferences. This has resulted in delay because some conferences have to be re-arranged to ensure effective communication with children and family members.
36. There is good management oversight of child protection work, for example through timely progress reviews during child protection investigations. This identifies progress against actions but a lack of systematic follow through in subsequent case management supervision means progress is not always effectively captured. SoS supervision on cases clearly demonstrates effective challenge to professional assumptions and analysis in most cases sampled. In more recently opened cases, this is leading to stronger and more robust actions that drive effective change.
37. A new multi-agency steering group has oversight of private fostering in Brent. This group is not fully established and has not yet had an impact on improving either the timeliness or quality of assessments or awareness levels and notification numbers. Plans are in place to undertake more awareness raising. However, the number of known private fostering arrangements remains low. There is drift in carrying out visits and assessments and, when children's cases are co-worked, poor liaison results in delay in developing plans to meet children's needs.
38. The Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) service is insufficiently resourced which limits awareness raising work needed with faith groups and partner agencies. Referrals from partner agencies are consequently low. The LADO annual report highlights necessary improvement actions. However, it does not set clear expectations for their completion and, as a result, it is difficult to track the progress and impact of planned actions. Strategy discussions are timely but it is not always clear how quickly agreed actions are carried out or what impact they have had.

The experiences and progress of children looked after and achieving permanence

Requires improvement

Summary

Outcomes for children looked after in Brent are not yet good because services are not consistently meeting the needs of all children.

Social workers and personal advisers do not regularly update assessments and plans to reflect young people’s current circumstances. The wishes and feelings of children are not always used to inform their plans, or collated and analysed strategically to help shape services.

Changes to services for children in care who go missing and those at risk of child sexual exploitation are not yet demonstrating sustained improvements. Children who have been missing do not consistently get offered, or receive, a return interview from an independent adult.

Strategies to ensure that there is a sufficient range and number of placement options for children and young people have not yet provided enough capacity to meet the needs of all children. Decisions to place children out of the local authority area are approved retrospectively and this means that their care plans do not receive enough consideration before they move into new placements.

When decisions are made to take children into care, these are appropriate. Care proceedings, which took an average of 66 weeks between April 2014 and March 2015 now average 29 weeks, quicker than the 35 week average for similar councils. This means that children move into permanent homes with carers or return to their families much more quickly.

A decrease in the number of temporary agency social workers and an increase in permanent staff is a positive for the longer term stability of the workforce but in the short term has meant that a minority of children have continued to experience frequent changes of social worker. Life story work is not yet consistently supporting all children to make sense of their identities; some materials provided for very young children are more suitable for older children.

Measures aimed at improving educational attainment for children looked after are not yet improving outcomes across all key stages.

Adoption performance is good. The local authority has given significant focus to improving the timeliness of adoption work. As a result, at the time of the inspection, no children were waiting to be placed with adopters where legal orders had been made to allow this to happen.

Care leavers receive appropriate support to help them make the transition to independence including moving into suitable accommodation. A high proportion progress to higher education but progression to apprenticeships is too low.

Inspection findings

39. At the time of the inspection, there were 318 children looked after by Brent. In the vast majority of cases, decisions to look after children are timely, appropriate and in the best interests of children. Decision makers record a clear rationale for taking children into care and parental consent when this is appropriate.
40. The duration of care proceedings has significantly improved from an average of 66 weeks between April 2014 and March 2015 to 29 weeks at present, which is better than the 35 week average for similar councils. The local authority has effective mechanisms in place to track the timeliness of work both leading up to and during court. The appointment of a case-tracking officer to share good practice, support and mentor social workers, and track individual cases has supported improvements in the quality of social work evidence and received positive feedback from the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service and court partners.
41. Processes for monitoring the quality of work before court proceedings, under the Public Law Outline (PLO), are not as robust as the processes for monitoring work in the court arena and inspectors found variability in the quality of PLO letters to parents. In a minority of cases, letters use complex legal language, which may result in families not being able to understand what is being said, or what is expected of them.
42. In the six months prior to the inspection, 53% of children who ceased to be looked after, returned to live with parents, relatives or other persons with parental responsibility. Support to these children is variable. Most of them receive regular visits from social workers, who also provide support to their parents but many of them do not have a plan that clearly lays out the support they will receive or provides targets for further progress.
43. Management oversight and scrutiny through the children looked after tracking panel, ensures good consideration is given to 'connected person' assessments for children looked after being placed with members of their extended families. Linked to this is a significant increase in the use of special guardianship orders from 10 in 2012–13 to 30 in 2014–15. Special guardianship arrangements in Brent are based on good quality assessments and carers benefit from thorough support plans.
44. Where children have a consistent social worker, who has been able to develop a positive relationship with them, there is evidence that they feel well understood and are actively engaged in shaping their plans. However, a minority of children continue to experience frequent changes of social worker. In these situations some children become tired of repeatedly telling their story and do not engage as well with their workers. This has also had a negative impact on the willingness of some young people to accept the offer of an advocate; only seven children looked after received an advocacy service

between April 2014 and March 2015. While inspectors found that most children looked after and young people they spoke to were not aware of the formal complaints procedures, they said that they had access to adults they trusted with their views.

45. Since the time of Ofsted's thematic inspection of services for children and young people at risk of child sexual exploitation, published in November 2014, in which Brent took part, there have been improvements in services to protect children from the risks associated with going missing and child sexual exploitation. There are increasing numbers of appropriate referrals to the missing and MASE panels. There is evidence of appropriate training provided to foster carers, residential workers and schools. This is part of a wider programme of safeguarding training, which also covers, bullying, e-safety, sexual health and diversity. Inspectors found that although an increasing number of young people who go missing are offered return home interviews, they are still not being offered to all young people for who they would be relevant. Those undertaking the interviews are not always appropriately independent individuals and the content of interviews is not routinely used to inform safety planning for young people.
46. Following recommendations from the Ofsted inspection of services for children looked after in 2011 and as noted by the Care Quality Commission's Review of health services for children looked after and safeguarding in 2014 there have been significant improvements in health services to children looked after in Brent. Performance on the completion of health assessments and of strength and difficulty questionnaires (SDQs), which young people fill in to help identify health needs and assess their wellbeing, shows significant improvement over the last year. Six monthly health assessments for children under six years of age, improved from 88% completion in 2013–14 to 100% in 2014–15. SDQ completion increased from 42% in 2013–14 to 74% in 2014–15, with progress being sustained into this current year.
47. The health team for children looked after undertake effective assessments of the health needs of all children in Brent as well as within a 20-mile radius. This can be extended where host authorities are unable to undertake assessments within timescales. This thorough approach is good practice because it helps ensure children's health needs can be met quickly because they are assessed in a timely manner. The secondment of a dedicated sexual health worker, offering sexual health advice and information to young people has contributed to low teenage pregnancy rates for children looked after. Robust quality assurance takes place of all health assessments whether children live in or out borough. This robust monitoring ensures that children's health needs are identified when they first arise and that they are effectively addressed.
48. The head of the virtual school has implemented a wide range of actions to improve the educational attainment of children looked after. Attainment gaps have narrowed at Key Stage 1 over the last three years and at Key Stage 2 in 2014–15 but despite initiatives to address them, they have continued to widen

at Key Stage 4. The virtual school is targeting additional help and tracking children's progress, but the quality of personal education plans is too variable and too many children are underachieving, limiting their options for future education, employment and economic well-being. Previous problems with low completion rates for personal education plans have been resolved. However, while a minority are completed well, the majority require improvement. Typically those less than good do not show children's progress over different years, do not have input from the child or do not include targets and actions that are detailed, sufficiently specific and measurable for children to reach their potential. The very large majority (87%) of children looked after attend good or outstanding schools. For those not doing so, the virtual school closely monitors the support provided and progression made by those children.

49. The proportions of children looked after at Key Stage 1 achieving at least level two in reading (71%), writing (71%) and mathematics (71%) improved in 2013–14 and remained in-line with national averages. In 2014–15, the proportion of children looked after at Key Stage 2 achieving at least Level 4 in reading (100%), writing (100%) and mathematics (100%) is very positive and represents a significant improvement on the 46%, 23% and 54% achieved in these subjects, respectively, in 2013–14. Those achieving five GCSEs grades A* to C, including English and mathematics, in 2014–15 is low at only 5%.
50. Inspectors found a good range of alternative educational provision provided through local and commissioned services. At the time of the inspection, 47 children were in alternative provision with all children offered at least 25 hours education per week. In 2015, GCSE outcomes were low with only one pupil (out of 14 Year 11 pupils sitting GCSEs) in commissioned alternative provision achieving five GCSEs grades A* to C. While opportunities to achieve vocational qualifications are in place, progression to employment, education and training was also low, at 32% for 2013–14. The provisional September 2015 guarantee figure of employment, education and training of 84% is a positive sign but at present only represents the guaranteed offer rather than what has actually been achieved for young people.
51. The monitoring of children missing education is thorough. The children-missing panel, a multi-agency panel, frequently monitor those children who are risk assessed as high priority, sharing information and coordinating strategies. The 147 children currently home educated are closely monitored by a dedicated educational welfare officer for elective home education, who also provides guidance to families considering this approach and annual updating visits.
52. Monitoring of placements by the children looked after panel has shown improvements in placement stability in Brent. In 2013–14, 17% of children had three or more placements during the year and by 2014–15, this had reduced to 13%. This is nearer to the levels of stability in similar councils and gives more children and young people the opportunity to form positive relationships with their carers.

53. The local authority's fostering strategy is not meeting its own objective to ensure that Brent has enough foster carers with the right skills to meet the needs of all of its children looked after. There was a net loss of nine carers in 2014–15, with this loss continuing into 2015–16. Strategic leaders are prioritising sufficiency and proactively target foster carer recruitment. The current number of potential foster carers under assessment is showing an improvement and the duration of assessments is closely monitored to ensure timely approvals but this has not yet been translated into more approved foster carers.
54. The local authority commissions a range of foster placements through independent fostering agencies, as part of the West London Alliance, a consortia arrangement with other London local authorities. These placements are of a good standard. The reasons foster carers leave the fostering service are not yet collated and analysed to inform the fostering strategy. The majority of semi-independent accommodation for care leavers is individually purchased and ongoing work to formalise commissioning of a framework through the West London Alliance is not yet in place.
55. Decisions for children to be placed out of authority are approved retrospectively by a senior manager. This practice does not give sufficient scrutiny to these arrangements and is not meeting care planning guidance and regulations in ensuring the needs of children are met. In a minority of cases, children placed out of the authority do not have appropriate educational placements identified for them at the time of placement.
56. Inspectors found appropriate placements of children with providers who have achieved 'good' ratings. Where re-inspections judged them to be below good, case recording showed that thorough risk assessments are done to decide if it is in a child's best interests to stay put or to move to another placement.
57. The fostering and adoption service is proactive in family finding for all children. Decisions made in permanence planning meetings and reviews are underpinned by research and thorough assessments of children's needs. These meetings consider adoption for older children when this is appropriate. Family finding for older children also considers the use of long-term foster care, including the use of externally commissioned placements. Inspectors found timely formal matching and good use of connected person's assessments.
58. Foster carer assessments presented to panel are variable in quality with most requiring some additional information or further analysis to fully support good decision making by panel. The panel adviser and panel chair provide robust quality assurance and challenge. Improvements since the recent appointment of the fostering development coordinator have seen a refocusing on the training agenda, to ensure a skilled workforce to meet the needs of children and help build stability. Recent improvements are well thought through but are not yet ensuring that all foster carers are encouraged by supervising social workers to engage fully in developing their skills and taking up available training. Foster

carers are very positive about one recent introduction, social pedagogy training; they say that it helps them to develop strategies for managing difficult behaviours and so reduces the chances of placements breaking down and children or young people having to move to new carers. Foster carers say that they feel well supported by the fostering service and inspectors found annual foster carer reviews to be of a high standard.

59. Inspectors observed sound arrangements in place for children to have contact with their family and friends. These arrangements are risk assessed and undertaken at the local family centre or in the community and are monitored regularly.
60. The stable, longstanding, independent reviewing officer (IRO) service, which is commissioned from an independent provider, has continued to support children and has provided them with some stability during a period where there has been a significant turnover in social workers. Ninety-three per cent of children attended or contributed to their reviews in 2014–15. However, in a minority of cases, recording of reviews and decisions lacked sufficient clarity or relevant timescales for completion. This makes it difficult for young people to understand or engage with plans for their future and for social workers and IROs to track if progress is being achieved.
61. Quality assurance, undertaken jointly between the director of the provider organisation for the IRO service and the local authority IRO team manager, is acknowledged by the local authority to have focused primarily on a small range of quantitative measures such as timescales and not enough on the quality and impact on children of the IRO's work. A well-attended, regular quarterly meeting looks at themes and joint training. However, some local authority performance data, such as current placement stability figures, are not shared with the IRO service and so cannot inform this consideration. Inspectors saw evidence of appropriate use of the dispute resolution process with 65 escalations recorded in 2014–15. Themes at that time included frequent changes of social worker, a lack of rigour in management oversight in ensuring case progression, and social workers not fulfilling some statutory duties such as regular visits.
62. The recording of work with children and their families does not always show all of the work done; statutory visits, case supervisions and updated plans are not consistently recorded. Such omissions were often the result of changes in social worker. Where inspectors saw SoS templates used, case recording much more clearly shows actions to be undertaken, their outcomes and the voices of children and young people themselves.
63. The Brent Children in Care council, Care in Action (CIA), regularly meets with senior managers and the corporate parenting committee to discuss things that the young people want to raise with the committee. This has resulted in a number of positive actions relating to specific issues, such as young people's involvement in a re-tender for semi-independent accommodation for care

leavers and their involvement in developing consultation leaflets. However, Brent does not systematically gather feedback from the children looked after population to inform service development, nor does it have a communication strategy, such as a 'you said we did' update to show children and young people the difference their voices can make.

64. Children looked after in Brent have good access to a range of leisure services with free tickets to most events at Wembley stadium and appropriate financial support for educational trips and leisure activities as part of their individual plans.
65. The ethnic, cultural and religious mix of the local authority's foster carers matches that of the borough and almost all children and young people are well matched with foster carers in this respect. Social workers' case recording shows appropriate consideration given to identifying children's diversity needs in a majority of cases. However, in a minority of cases where a translator was needed, problems with their availability have resulted in delayed or cancelled meetings for children and their families. This in turn leads to delay in children's needs being assessed and met.

<p>The graded judgement for adoption performance is that it is good</p>
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66. Adoption is considered early for all children. A well-reasoned rationale is clearly recorded to explain decisions where adoption is not the most appropriate plan to meet children's needs. These decisions are supported by research findings and often informed by consultation with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and professionals who know children well.
67. Regular permanence planning meetings are routinely attended by the placements service, ensuring that key staff are aware of all children who may require adoption. Parallel planning is well established. This allows for early family finding and ensures that adoptive placements are identified quickly for children who need them. Currently, there are no children with a placement order waiting to be placed with adopters and family finding has identified potential families for two children pending court decisions.
68. At the conclusion of legal proceedings, when children are made subject to a Placement Order, the case responsibility transfers from care planning teams to the adoption and post permanence support team. Although this increases the number of social workers a child experiences it does ensure that urgency and focus is given to family finding and securing an adoption placement for children. Regular scrutiny is given to the cases of children where the plan for adoption has not been achieved. This has contributed to the timely and appropriate rescinding of adoption decisions after family finding has not found a suitable match. The decisions for three children have been rescinded in the 12

months prior to inspection. Parallel planning has successfully identified alternative long term permanent arrangements for these children.

69. Timeliness of adoption work has significantly improved and this trend is continuing in 2015–16. From the time a child enters care to moving to an adoptive placement the Brent three-year average for 2012–15 is 544 days. While not meeting the government threshold of 487 days this performance is better than the England average of 628 days and the Brent 2011–14 average of 652 days. Similarly, from when the court makes the order enabling the local authority to place a child with adopters until the child is placed, the time children wait in Brent has reduced from 306 days in 2011–14 to 197 days in 2012–15. Again, this performance is better than the national average of 217 days but does not yet meet the government threshold of 121 days.
70. The quality of child permanence reports has improved over time. The large majority provide comprehensive information about the child, their identified needs, birth family history and clearly articulate why the child is unable to remain with their parents or within their family. When new information in relation to the child's development or parental health is identified, the child's permanence report is updated up until the point when a suitable match is identified for the child. This allows prospective adopters to have the most up to date information available about the child.
71. Recruitment and assessment of adopters are now aligned to national recruitment and assessment arrangements. Regional partnership working has increased the regularity of the mandatory preparation training for adopters, enabling adopter recruitment to conclude more quickly. Adopter assessments are of good quality, identifying the strengths and vulnerabilities of adopters, which assists in the matching of children with adopters. The local authority is currently targeting its recruitment of adopters to increase the pool of adopters who are able to offer placements to older children, those with complex needs and those which enable brothers and sisters to remain together. The local authority does consider and encourage fostering to adopt and concurrent adoption arrangements. However, the number of adopters who choose this option remains very low.
72. The number of children requiring adoption in Brent has reduced, in line with the national picture. In addition, many of these children are very young. As a result, for many children a choice of adopters is available. Careful matching with prospective adopters takes place at selection meetings. These meetings rigorously consider which prospective adopters would best meet individual children's needs. Decisions made at these meetings are well recorded and clearly articulate the reasons why specific adopters are chosen. The right balance is given to securing the best placement that will meet the holistic needs of the child and seeking an exact ethnicity match. When no in-house adopters are available to meet the needs of children this is identified at an early stage. Family finding is then extended to the regional consortium and, when necessary, national family finding takes place.

73. The local authority currently has 13 adopter households waiting to be matched with children. These adopters have been recruited in the last two years and their profiles reflect a national drive in adopter recruitment. For a small number of these adopters, their circumstances have changed which makes them temporarily unavailable. The large majority have narrow requirements which are limiting the children with which they can be matched. All these adopters have had timely referral to the national adoption register and profiles shared within the regional consortium. Good efforts are made to continue to family find for these adopters both locally and nationally. The next steps support group has been established to ensure continued support to these adopters while family finding continues.
74. The adoption and permanence panel has a suitably independent chair with a sufficiently wide range of members who are knowledgeable about adoption and permanence. This includes adopted adults, adopters and consistent elected member attendance. Panel administration is effective. The agency adviser provides robust quality assurance on the papers presented to panel, identifying deficits early, so that these can be rectified before panel and avoid delay. Panel members carefully consider all applications, making sound recommendations to the agency decision maker. They also provide feedback to the agency on the quality of each report, the verbal presentation of social workers and the timeliness of assessments. This contributes to improving practice. Decisions by the agency decision maker are timely and carefully considered.
75. Adopters are well supported by social workers when children first move to their care with careful consideration given to the transition arrangements. Foster carers are an integral part of these arrangements and help prepare children well for the move to their new family. Many children moving to adopters in Brent are very young. While life story books are provided, they do not assist direct work between adopters and the child in the early days of placement as they are not age appropriate. Good quality 'later life' letters are provided to help children when they are older to understand the plans that have been made for them. Inspectors found 'Wish You Well' contact between children and their birth families sensitively managed, and direct and indirect letterbox contact arrangements supported.
76. Adoption and post-permanence support is provided to all those who have had experience of adoption. During 2014–15, 47 families were provided with adoption support. This included services to birth parents and adopted adults as well as children and their adopters. Almost all adoption support plans appropriately identify children's needs, including the support needed in the short, medium and long term and how these will be met. The service offer ongoing support and adopters speak positively about adoption fun days and regular communications from the team. Detailed and analytical adoption support assessments underpin applications to the Adoption Support Fund which is increasingly used by adopters to access specialised therapeutic support for children.

The graded judgement about the experience and progress of care leavers is that it requires improvement

77. Care leavers reported to inspectors that communication between personal advisers and themselves is frequent and that they feel well supported. The proportion of care leavers that personal advisers are not in touch with is low at 6%. Where young people are disabled, in need of supported housing, or for those in need of mental health support, personal advisers work closely with partners to ensure a smooth transition to adult services. Where appropriate the existing social worker will remain the key contact with the young person when they leave care to provide continuity of support. Personal advisers strongly encourage young people to stay in care until their 18th birthday and consequently the proportion doing so improved from 57% in 2013–14 to 61% in 2014–15, although this is still lower than the average for similar councils or for England, of 67%.
78. Appropriate use is made of drug and alcohol services to support young people with drug and alcohol misuse problems. Dedicated nurses for children looked after provide advice for young people with sexual health concerns. A strong relationship between the youth offending team and the family adolescent support team ensures a proactive response to meeting the educational needs and providing intensive support for young people being released from custody. Safeguarding needs are considered when young people are arranging accommodation. For example, one young person took up a tenancy outside the borough due to previous involvement with gangs.
79. Pathway plans vary too much in quality. This is rightly identified by local authority managers as an area for further improvement. In the best cases, plans clearly reflect the views and needs of the individual young person and are written in the first person to give greater ownership. However, in a quarter of cases considered by inspectors, the reviews of pathway plans were not undertaken within appropriate timeframes. This variation in quality and timeliness was reflected in the views of young people when they talked to inspectors about how helpful they found their plans.
80. The support for care leavers' transition to independence has improved through the development of a 'Preparation for Independence' booklet and checklist in consultation with care leavers. The booklet is designed to develop young peoples' skills and knowledge for independent living and provide support and guidance in the preparation of pathway plans. One social worker enthusiastically talked through how she uses it with young people on an ongoing basis and how the information supports the preparation of pathway plans. She said it supports active engagement with the young person because it encourages dialogue and an increased ownership of the pathway plan as a result. However, the booklet and checklist are not yet being systematically used

with all young people and there are no plans to catch up with any recent care leavers who have not had this booklet.

81. A housing panel meets monthly to track the 'move on plans' of young people over the age of 17 and care leavers, who are supported to move into a range of accommodation appropriate to their needs. Care leavers receive a £2000 moving on allowance. The proportion of 19–21 year-old-care leavers in suitable accommodation increased from 70% in 2013–14 to 80% in 2014–15 and at the time of the inspection all care leaver were judged to be in suitable accommodation by the local authority. The appropriateness of multiple occupancy dwellings is now checked as part of the commissioning process and the quality of semi-independent accommodation has much improved in last 12 months.
82. The local authority has a policy not to use bed and breakfast accommodation for young people, and incidents of its use have only occurred in rare and exceptional circumstances. Tenancy breakdown rates for care leavers are very low with only two in the last 12 months. The proportion of care leavers who choose staying put arrangements with foster carers is also improving. In 2013-14 only 37% of young people who turned 18 remained in foster care. In 2014-15 this had improved to 52%. When a 16- or 17-year-old young person presents themselves as homeless, swift action is taken to ensure that appropriate accommodation is found. Housing staff and social workers work well together and when it is in a young person's interest for them to become a looked after child, these decisions are made swiftly.
83. The personal and educational achievements of care leavers and children looked after are recognised at an annual celebration evening and young people are proud of their achievements. Care leavers also have good opportunities to become role models for other care leavers or for those entering the care system. The Brent pledge and care leavers' charter sets out the Brent local authority promises for children in care and care leavers. However, care leavers met during the inspection had little understanding of the pledge or its relevance for them. The CIA group includes care leavers and it has been effective in instigating improvements. For example, concerns raised by care leavers about the quality of semi-independent housing led to their subsequent involvement in the commissioning process for new providers.
84. Care leavers have good access to careers advice and guidance, producing curriculum vitae, and preparing for interviews. The proportion of care leavers in higher education is excellent. In 2013–14, the percentage in higher education was 30% against an 18% average in similar councils and a 6% England average. Brent is currently supporting 35 care leavers in higher education. However, low and declining GCSE achievement is resulting in the number progressing to higher education reducing. A university panel provides a detailed analysis of care leavers in university, closely monitoring progress and achievement, and identifying any additional support required.

85. The analysis of the progress and achievement of care leavers in further education and of those on apprenticeships is not sufficiently well developed. Although the local authority has six ring-fenced apprenticeships for care leavers, current local authority figures show that progression into apprenticeships, at 4%, is low. Although this low figure is not out of line with other councils, the local authority has taken the positive step of identifying this as a service priority. Hard to reach young people are supported by a dedicated mentor commissioned through the virtual school but although better than the national average, around one-quarter of care leavers are not in education, employment or training.
86. The children looked after nurse meets regularly with young people to go through their health information and also completes exit health assessments, as young people leave care, to consider wider health aspects with them. Care leavers receive an appropriate health passport which has been recently revised. Discharge letters for disabled children are written by the designated doctor to the child's general practitioner at the point of transition to adult services. This is good practice because it ensures that relevant information is available to professionals to help meet the needs of the young person.
87. Access to mental health support for care leavers under the age of 18 matches that provided to children looked after and young people and contains some specific services, over and above mainstream CAMHS provision. There are not, however, any care leaver-specific services for those over 18, which means that the particular needs of these care leavers may not be as swiftly recognised or met as for those under 18 years of age.

Leadership, management and governance

Requires improvement

Summary

The local authority, with strong leadership provided by the director of children’s services and the chief executive, has been successful in making a number of important improvements in the quality of services children receive and the outcomes they achieve. The SoS approach has made a significant difference to how well social workers work with children. The health needs of children looked after are much better considered and met than they were a year ago. Care proceedings and adoption are much timelier. The local authority has also been successful in ensuring that it has a more stable workforce and is less reliant on temporary agency staff. Social workers have manageable caseloads that afford them the time necessary to see children regularly.

However, overall the local authority is not yet providing a good service for children and young people because some developments are too new to have made a positive difference and others are not yet in place. Some planned improvements to services for children at risk of child sexual exploitation, such as the appointment of a data analyst and the commissioning of a contracted service to provide therapeutic support, are not yet in place and the specialist risk assessment tool is not yet sufficiently informing work with young people. Work with children and young people who are missing from home or care is not good enough and is not well integrated with work to tackle child sexual exploitation.

As a corporate parent and in its wider work with children, the local authority does not systematically collect and analyse feedback from children and young people to help it understand the difference it is making to influence and improve service delivery. The number of placement changes experienced by children and young people looked after, although reducing, is higher than the average for similar local authorities. The local authority has not yet managed to ensure that it has enough foster carers with the right skills and that they are consistently well enough matched with children and young people.

Performance management and quality assurance systems are under-developed. They are not well joined up or used effectively to drive up performance. The local authority scrutiny committee lacks sufficient focus on the safeguarding and social care needs of children and young people. It is not possible to see how it has identified any areas of poor practice or supported any service improvements for children and young people in this area of service provision.

The majority of social workers receive regular supervision and management oversight of their work. When informed by the SoS approach there is sharper analysis and a strong focus on the wishes and feelings of children. However, gaps in the supervision and case direction received by a minority of social workers has led to delays in progressing work to improve outcomes for some children.

Inspection findings

88. The director of children's services and her senior team of managers are focused and energetic in driving improvements in key areas of the local authority's work. A child or young person in Brent is more likely than a year ago to receive effective help if they are at risk of child sexual exploitation and more likely to have the chance of building a good relationship with a single social worker who does not change during the time they and their family are receiving help from the department. A child or young person in the care of the local authority is also more likely to report good wellbeing and to have their health needs effectively met. Improvements such as these are making a positive difference for children.
89. Despite improvements such as those mentioned above, the overall quality of services provided to children and young people in Brent requires improvement to be good. This is because the pace and impact of these changes is not consistent across the full range of services provided by the local authority. Some changes are already making a positive difference to children, while others are yet to have an impact or have not yet commenced.
90. The local authority's introduction of the SoS approach, although not yet fully embedded in all practice, is a significant development. Where social workers and other professionals use this approach, assessments of children's needs contain fuller information, better analysis and a stronger focus on children's wishes and feelings. This leads to plans and the services that meet children's needs.
91. The local authority is implementing a new electronic case recording system to improve their ability to access and use information and data. This new system is not yet fully operational and the current system contains flaws. This means that the local authority cannot assure themselves that the individual needs of all children in need are being consistently identified and met. Data produced about the number of children in need who the local authority is working with present as a significant under-reporting of the actual number.
92. At a senior level, the former chief executive, who has only very recently left the post, has taken an active role in monitoring the work of children's services, and instigated effective action to address identified problems. In addition to regular meetings with the director of children's services, she has met bi-monthly with the director, the leader and deputy leader of the council, lead member for children and the independent chair of the LSCB. As a result of this meeting an additional £500,000 of funding was directed to support the recruitment of additional social workers. This has led to reduced caseloads. It also provided funding to ensure the roll-out across Brent schools of the drama production 'Chelsea's Choice', to provide information and guidance to young people about child sexual exploitation.

93. The local authority scrutiny committee has considered the education, health and early years needs of children but has given too little consideration to the welfare and safeguarding needs of children. When these needs have been looked at, for example in the committee's consideration of the annual report of the LSCB, there has been little urgency in addressing identified deficits and it is not possible to see what impact the committee has had.
94. As a corporate parent, the local authority has worked closely and effectively with health agencies to achieve significant improvements in meeting the health needs of children looked after. Significant and sustained reductions in the length of care proceedings along with other improvements in the pace of work, such as more timely adoptions, mean that most children in Brent who need a permanent home that is not with their parents achieve this in a timely manner. However, the local authority's fostering strategy is not yet meeting its target to ensure that it has sufficient carers with the right skills to meet the needs of children looked after, particularly those who are older or who have brothers and sisters who also need to be looked after. Although the placement stability of children looked after is improving, it is still less good than that in similar local authorities and the overall stock of foster carers is reducing.
95. There are some good examples of the local authority listening to the views of young people and taking action as a result, such as inviting young people contributing to the content of a new leaflet for young people leaving care. However, more work is required to ensure that the views of children and young people are routinely sought and acted on. The take-up of advocacy for children attending looked after reviews is low and this is not a service normally available for those attending child protection case conferences. The wishes and feelings of children expressed to advocates in complaints or in return home interviews are not aggregated and analysed to identify key themes that could inform service planning.
96. At a strategic level, there is a lack of sufficient cohesion in the way that agencies work together to provide services for children. The joint strategic needs assessment (JSNA) lacks a strong enough focus on the social care needs of children. The Health and Wellbeing Board has suffered from poor attendance over the last year and has been described as having, 'lost its way'. There is no current shared plan that sets out how agencies will provide services or against which agencies can measure the collective difference they are making for children. The Health and Wellbeing Board held a workshop event in June this year to bring greater clarity and drive to its work and the leader of the council has recently taken over as the chair of the board. These are positive developments but are too new to have had an impact. Similarly, the new Brent Children's Trust, although developing fast and increasingly providing a real focus for agencies to discuss and plan services, is also at too early a stage to have had a significant impact. For example, discussions at the trust about establishing shared commissioning arrangements across agencies are detailed and thorough but are yet to be put into practice.

97. Targeted work by the local authority over the last year has led to dramatically improved communication and joint working between children's services and schools in Brent. Schools are positive about the advice and the direct support they receive in a number of areas and the positive difference it has made, including, children missing education, concerns they may have about possible female genital mutilation, gang affiliation, radicalisation and work with unaccompanied asylum seeking children. This improved relationship has not yet translated into schools being more ready to take on the role of lead-professional in CAFs. The local authority is aware of this and is working with schools to provide training and a clearer, briefer CAF form to help address this situation. However, schools currently take on the lead professional role in a relatively low 9% of CAFs.
98. The local authority has made progress in their work to combat child sexual exploitation. Extensive awareness training has been undertaken. This has not only included relevant childcare professionals and young people themselves but also over 100 licensed drivers and visits to all local hotels. Good joint working with the police has had a positive impact including the identification of 'hot-spots' and the issuing of abduction notices in cases of concern where this is appropriate (16 issued in 2015 between April and the start of the inspection). Some analysis of trends and themes has been undertaken but this needs to be in greater detail to inform future service planning. An additional data analyst position has been agreed but is not yet in place to support work in this area.
99. A risk assessment tool has been developed to assess risk and protective factors in relation to child sexual exploitation. Inspectors found the tool was inconsistently used to assess risk and inform planning. This reduces the potential of timely interventions with some young people. A Safer London young person's advocate has been appointed to add capacity to the support provided to young people but plans to move away from spot-purchased therapeutic support for victims to a more focused and responsive contracted provision have not yet been realised. Although there has been good joint working with the police, this has not been consistent across all agencies, for example staff from genito-urinary medicine (GUM) clinics are yet to attend MASE panel meetings.
100. The local authority and partners are not making the best use of intelligence from return home interviews for children and young people who have been missing. The content of interviews is not collected and analysed to identify themes that could inform service planning in the future. The identification of the 'pull' factors that lead young people to go missing is a particular gap in the analysis of this information when it is considered alongside information about those who may be at risk of child sexual exploitation.
101. Joint work with the police is also strong in relation to countering the risk that young people may be at as a result of radicalisation. This area of work is mature, well-coordinated, and integrated into the broader offer of services for children. This ensures that children's wider welfare needs are considered

alongside their specific needs arising from radicalisation. Particular examples of good practice in Brent include projects specifically to support parents and organisations managing supplementary schools.

102. The use of performance management and quality assurance processes to assess the impact and improve the quality of services for children is under-developed. The range of data considered is largely appropriate but is not adapted as new priority areas are identified. For example once the local authority's own return home audit identified an under-use of return home interviews, this was not added to the data set to monitor if performance improved. Analysis of quantitative performance data is not enhanced by qualitative information from audits, feedback from children and families or the views of staff. This limits the local authority's ability to form a rounded analysis that would best support managers in understanding the reasons for any poor performance and identifying possible solutions.
103. Information from audits is not well-joined up, or routinely used to drive improvement. For example, the local authority's audit of child protection case conferences concluded that more Family Group Conferences should be undertaken at nearly the same point in time as the decision was made to terminate the existing service. Case audits are of a reasonable quality but do not give rise to specific recommendations to improve work with individual children. They are not collectively analysed for learning that could inform training or service design. This means that the local authority is not getting the best value from the auditing work it is undertaking.
104. The local authority has not appointed a principal social worker. The absence of such a post holds back their ability to embed good practice and limits senior managers' capacity to fully understand the quality and impact of front-line practice.
105. The supervision and management oversight of staff is variable. The majority of social workers receive regular supervision and management oversight. Where this is informed by the SoS approach, the quality of case discussions is generally good and contains a sharp focus on the wishes and feelings of children. However, inspectors found evidence of significant gaps in the supervision, case direction and oversight received by a minority of social workers. Where this occurs, it has led to delays in progressing work and improving outcomes for some children. Where this has been the case, it has largely been in teams that have experienced greater or more recent turnover of staff, including managers.
106. The local authority provides staff with a strong training and development package. Through the introduction of the SoS approach and the provision of mobile technology such as tablets, social workers are given both theoretical and practical tools to help them do their job. A broad range of appropriately focused training is available both directly from the local authority and via the West London Alliance, a consortia arrangement with other local authorities through

which external providers are commissioned to provide training. Newly qualified social workers who are in their assessed first year of employment (ASYE) describe the value of the training and support they receive and this is helping many of them decide to remain in Brent.

107. This strong training and development package, alongside targeted advertising and specific funding for additional staffing has enabled the local authority to reduce staff turnover. For this reason there is an increased percentage of staff who are full time and the borough has reduced its reliance on agency social workers. At the time of the inspection, agency staff made up 33% of staff rather than the 40% they represented in September 2014. Although turnover is still a problem in some social work teams, increased staffing levels mean that social workers in Brent have manageable caseloads. This not only means that social workers are more likely to be able to see children often enough to build relationships of trust with them but has also supported recruitment and retention of social workers.

The Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB)

The Local Safeguarding Children Board requires improvement

Executive summary

The LSCB requires improvement because:

The board meets all of its statutory functions and through its coordination of partnership working has an influence on frontline practice. However, the lack of sufficient rigour with which it has carried out its monitoring function has hampered its ability to understand the overall effectiveness of safeguarding services. This includes an inability to fully understand the positive influence that the board is having through its audits and programme of work.

The board's linkage with other strategic bodies has been weak but is improving. There is a recent improvement in the relationship between the LSCB and the Health and Wellbeing Board, but the LSCB has too little influence over the priorities of the Health and Wellbeing Board. The board is beginning to clarify its role in relation to the newly formed Children's Trust. There is, as yet, no formal link with the Family Justice Board. Although links with the third sector are made through the active Community Reference Group (CRG), there is currently no voluntary sector representative on the board, which is a gap.

The data-set which the board uses to monitor the performance of agencies is being refined. It does not currently support the board in effectively monitoring all safeguarding activity across the borough. The board is aware of the limitations of the data-set and is beginning to ensure that the story behind the data is captured, as well as presenting data from a wider variety of sources. This work is in its infancy so has not yet had an impact.

While the board has undertaken some awareness raising activity in relation to private fostering, the number of private fostering arrangements known about remains low.

Recommendations

108. Continue to refine the LSCB data-set to monitor the effectiveness of safeguarding services, ensuring that this includes data relating to areas of practice in need of improvement that are not currently monitored, such as: return home interviews for children missing from home or care; children and young people's attendance at child protection case conferences; and private fostering.
109. Ensure that intelligence from audits and data monitoring is analysed and used to influence the planning and commissioning of safeguarding services across the borough and that progress against recommendations is tracked.
110. Strengthen links with the Health and Wellbeing Board and establish links with the Family Justice Board.
111. Ensure that the voluntary sector is formally represented on the LSCB.
112. Improve the monitoring of private fostering activity across the borough to ensure that partner organisations report private fostering arrangements appropriately.
113. Prioritise the completion of a full section 11 audit to monitor how effectively agencies are discharging their statutory duties to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.

Inspection findings – the Local Safeguarding Children Board

114. The Brent LSCB has an experienced and capable independent chair who has been in post since June 2015. He has undertaken a thorough self-assessment of the board's current functioning which has identified areas for improvement. The outgoing chair left the board in February 2015. During the intervening four months, the board was led by the deputy chair and while most activity continued, there was a delay in some areas of work pending the arrival of the new chair.
115. Links between the LSCB and other strategic bodies such as the Health and Wellbeing Board have only recently been established. There has been no link made with the Family Justice Board. This means that the board has not discharged the role of 'critical friend' to other agencies as effectively as it would if these links were better established.
116. Members of the board are at an appropriate level of seniority within their own organisations. They are committed and clearly give a high priority to safeguarding, undertaking joint work to forward the board's priorities. Currently, there is no formal voluntary sector representation, which is a gap,

although voluntary and faith sectors are effectively engaged through the active and influential CRG.

117. There are three lay members who sit on the Board; they are proactive and their work is a strength. The CRG, is chaired by the lay members and acts as a conduit reporting to the board on the views of the community and informing the community about the activities of the board while raising awareness of safeguarding. The work undertaken by the CRG to promote safeguarding has had a clear impact on community engagement, for example in the identification of a potential hotspot for child sexual exploitation. CRG meetings have been held in community and faith locations across the borough. The CRG has been active in ensuring that the voice of the child, and community, is represented at board meetings with young people actively involved.
118. The annual report 2014–15 is too descriptive and does not present a rigorous and transparent analysis of safeguarding across the borough. It identifies local priorities and these are well reflected in the business plan. Priorities link to sub-group activities, to the commissioning of audits and also to the planning of training. Coordinated work relating to the priorities has led to an improvement in frontline practice, for example, the work around children missing education has led to improved tracking of children and supported a reduction in the number of children missing education. There has also been activity to improve frontline practice regarding female genital mutilation and radicalisation and this is reflected in the improving quality of work seen by inspectors in these areas.
119. The board undertakes a range of multi-agency audits which include frontline practitioners. The audits are linked to the priorities of the board or to challenges presented to the board. A programme of audits is planned for the current year which is mid-way through. Audits are of variable quality, although the majority appropriately identify areas for improvement and lead to activity which has a positive influence on practice.
120. The data-set used by the board is being revised. It has been overly focused on children's social care and has lacked a broad range of data from across agencies that would give a fuller picture of the difference agencies are making for children and better highlight areas in need of improvement. Organisations are beginning to offer a narrative to accompany the data to provide a more qualitative analysis and an understanding of the story behind the data. This work has only recently begun so it is too early to assess how effectively this will assist the board to monitor the effectiveness of safeguarding practice. This lack of rigour in the way the board monitors and scrutinises agencies performance, tracks the completion of any recommendations it makes and assesses the difference this has made to the impact agencies achieve means that the board cannot be fully clear about the influence it exerts or the difference this makes for children and young people in Brent. For example, an audit into paediatric child protection assessments resulted in improved working arrangements between health and children's services, more clarity about the referral process, and assessments being undertaken more appropriately. However, data have

not been collected in a way which allows the board to assess the rate of improvement in this area.

121. Board members have relied on reports and presentations to enable them to understand what is happening at the front line, given the limitations of the data set. Frequent presentations, for example from early help, have enabled them to keep up to date and, in some cases, information presented to the board has allowed them to identify gaps and areas for improvement. For example, the identification of an issue involving young people in custody led to an audit, followed by improvement work. There was a resultant improvement in identifying young people as vulnerable and referring them to the Brent Family Front Door (BFFD). However, because of the way the board receives data, they are unaware of the percentage rise in referrals to the BFFD as a result of this activity.
122. The lack of clarity about the effectiveness of safeguarding services which has resulted from the quality of the data has meant that the board has had limited influence on the planning and commissioning of services. While there has been some influence, for example in the commissioning of specialist mental health services for children with disabilities and those who are looked after, this has happened in an ad-hoc and reactive manner. This means that the board cannot influence the direction of improvement in a systematic way which relates to priorities and identified gaps.
123. Work around child sexual exploitation has progressed since the Ofsted thematic inspection in 2014. Although further improvement is needed, particularly with regard to the risks to children missing from home or care, there is a sharper strategic focus, with better coordinated activity to pull together information, data and intelligence that is being used to build up a picture of activity across the Borough. Work with the Clinical Commissioning Group, Police and the Safer Brent Partnership has improved understanding and there is investment from board partners to resource future work, including the appointment of a dedicated child sexual exploitation analyst.
124. Social workers spoken to during this inspection were very positive about the training provided by the board. Training is responsive to changing needs and trainers quickly incorporate lessons from serious case reviews (SCRs), audits and other learning into current training programmes. Learning Pool is an electronic system which has enabled access to training for a range of professionals including those from the voluntary sector. Gaps in registration and attendance are followed up. Learning Pool enables access to free online as well as face-to-face training. Some evaluation of training takes place but assessment of ongoing impact is in its infancy.
125. There is a learning and improvement framework in place which the board uses effectively to promote learning from SCRs and to ensure that front line staff are aware of key messages. Social workers spoken to are aware of SCRs undertaken by the board and the implications for practice. The vast majority of

actions have been completed from the action plan arising from the most recent SCR.

126. The child death overview panel undertakes reviews appropriately. They have a group of trained professionals who are available to undertake home visits following a death. Cases are reviewed in a timely way, and good information sharing means that decisions can quickly be reached about the preventability of deaths. Trends are analysed and deaths are broken down into relevant categories such as, age, gender and postcode. A review of all deaths led to active awareness raising about safe sleeping. An issue around vitamin D deficiency was identified and linked to national health priorities, with training and awareness raising undertaken as a result.
127. The board has adopted pan-London LSCB policies and procedures which are localised if necessary and reviewed regularly. These are all accessible via the LSCB website. However, a section 11 audit is currently overdue which means that the board cannot have an up-to-date understanding of how rigorously and effectively these are applied. A recent section 157 audit with schools was prioritised over a full section 11 audit and this has proved useful in ensuring that appropriate work is undertaken to improve safeguarding in schools.
128. There is an up-to-date threshold document which practitioners are aware of. It is regularly updated to reflect changes in priorities, for example female genital mutilation and the Prevent duty. Thresholds are understood and applied consistently across the borough.
129. Private fostering has not been systematically tracked by the board and, although there has been some awareness-raising activity this has not led to an increase in identification or referral.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences of children and young people who have needed or still need help and/or protection. This also includes children and young people who are looked after and young people who are leaving care and starting their lives as young adults.

Inspectors considered the quality of work and the difference adults make to the lives of children, young people and families. They read case files, watched how professional staff work with families and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care given to children and young people. Wherever possible, they talked to children, young people and their families. In addition the inspectors have tried to understand what the local authority knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the people who it is trying to help, protect and look after.

The inspection of the local authority was carried out under section 136 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

The review of the Local Safeguarding Children Board was carried out under section 15A of the Children Act 2004.

Ofsted produces this report of the inspection of local authority functions and the review of the local safeguarding children board under its power to combine reports in accordance with section 152 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

The inspection team consisted of eight of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) from Ofsted.

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