

Brent

Inspection of children's social care services

Inspection dates: 14 May 2018 to 25 May 2018

**Lead inspector: Tracey Metcalfe
Her Majesty's Inspector**

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

The strong leadership at a political level and throughout the council has resulted in significant improvements in the quality of social work practice for children since the last inspection. The care for children and care leavers is outstanding. Firm foundations are now in place to facilitate and enable good or better social work to flourish. Senior leaders recognise and prioritise the needs of children and young people. They focus their attention on the things that matter and inspire staff to perform well.

Staff and managers are ambitious for children and young people. The lived experiences of children and young people are at the heart of social work practice. Practitioners and managers are committed to providing children, young people and care leavers with long-term stability during childhood and beyond. This means that their outcomes are improving. There is a strong focus on early permanence and staying safe.

Children and young people receive early help and protection when they need it. The quality of child and family assessments is good. Safeguarding practice is effective,

but does not always follow statutory guidance or comply with the council's own policy. While the strategic response when children go missing from home and care is good, the pace of improvement in operational practice has been too slow. For a small number of children, not enough use is made of pre-proceedings when risks escalate.

What needs to improve

- The response when children and young people go missing from home and care.
- Escalation to pre-proceedings where children's circumstances do not improve quickly enough, including the application of statutory guidance in kinship placements.
- Procedures should always follow statutory guidance and comply with the council's own policies.
- The quality of case recording and supervision, for example the quality of recording by the local authority designated officer and supervision records for the children with disabilities team.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection requires improvement

1. The multicultural demographic of Brent presents complex challenges for children's social care. The vast majority of children and families in the borough come from diverse backgrounds, cultures and nationalities. There are 150 different languages spoken. The early help offer reflects the diverse needs of the communities. Help and advice are easily accessible and provide focused support for the whole family on a wide range of issues. Interventions and support for children and adults exposed to domestic abuse are impressive. Children and adults benefit from wraparound practical and emotional support services. There is a strong partnership approach across early help services. However, not enough partner agencies complete early help assessments. This results in too many contacts to the Brent Family Front Door (BFFD) requesting a statutory assessment, many of which are unnecessary.
2. The BFFD is a robust multi-agency safeguarding hub that makes good decisions about levels of risk and need. Effective screening and prioritisation of children's cases are driving timely decision-making. Where there are safeguarding concerns and a need for intervention, responses are swift. Senior managers have recently commissioned an independent review of the BFFD, having recognised that thresholds to convene strategy meetings are too low. Inspectors agree that too many referrals result in a section 47 enquiry when a lower-level response would be more proportionate and appropriate. A much greater understanding and interrogation of data is improving the quality of practice and decision-making. However, current practice does not always follow statutory guidance or the council's own policies and procedures. The majority of strategy meetings are only held with the police and no other agency. This reduces the quality of information sharing and discussion about how and if further enquiries should be undertaken.
3. The distinct needs and vulnerabilities of adolescents are well understood by senior managers. The daily integrated risk management meeting (IRM) discusses and triages high-risk referrals. It has a particular focus on young people at risk of involvement or affected by gangs. A significant number of adolescents in Brent face one or more significant risks. Gang-related activity and county lines has a pervasive presence within the borough. There is a strong partnership response to keeping young people safe. In particular, there is effective work with police and youth offending services locally and across other London boroughs.
4. Effective gang intervention programmes have been commissioned to work with children and young people on the periphery of gangs. This is to try to change behaviours. Specific funding has secured an early help gangs mentor. The mentor works effectively across social work teams to try to divert young

people from gang activity and help young people exit gangs. A large majority of young people have engaged with the worker, and there have been significant reductions in risk for young people. Programmes working with girls are designed to be sensitive to their specific needs. Building strong relationships with young people is at the core of this success.

5. Although the numbers of children and young people at risk of radicalisation are low, a robust process ensures that they are protected. A 'Prevent' action plan clearly defines agencies' responsibilities. Safeguarding and multi-agency working are very effective for these young people and their families. Schools are particularly alert and proactive. Low numbers of children and young people are identified as being at risk.
6. The daily IRM is helping to identify children and young people at risk of sexual exploitation much earlier. There has been an increase in child sexual exploitation strategy meetings being held. This results in structured risk assessments being undertaken with multi-agency partners. Strong senior management oversight tracks the progress of interventions and outcomes. This is leading to a better understanding of the profile of exploitation and an improved understanding of the experiences of children and young people. Where risks escalate, prompt and proportionate safeguarding actions are taken. Access to therapeutic support is available and of good quality, although the increased demand can mean a delay of up to three months for support. Good use is made of young people's mentors to develop relationships and engage young people. The Multi-agency Sexual Exploitation panel has a focused oversight of individual children. The panel removes effectively any multi-agency blockages or obstacles to interventions. The panel is effective at directing resources and activity in response to identified patterns or trends.
7. The strategic response for children who go missing from home and care has improved since the last inspection. However, operational practice has been too slow to improve. There is very recent evidence of staff training, and a refreshed return home interview template has been devised. A children's rights officer has been recently appointed to undertake this work. Consequently, the number of return interviews which take place when young people go missing has increased from a very low base, but they are still far too low. This limits the opportunity to understand what happens when young people go missing, where they go and why. It also limits the ability to identify any additional safety needs. Although a strategic vulnerable adolescent's panel considers themes, trends and links to other areas of vulnerability and risk, it does not have operational oversight of what is happening on a day-to-day basis for individual children. There is a gap at this level to monitor the individual outcomes of young people who go missing and to ensure that they are adequately supported.

8. Child and family assessments have improved significantly since the last inspection. In some teams in one service area, a small number are undertaken by social work assistants. While these are overseen by a manager, this is contrary to local procedures and statutory guidance. The use of an assessment tool is well embedded in practice. This has led to a much better identification of risk and need, and in particular, the identification of neglect. An increasing number of children are appropriately made subject to child protection plans in this category. Prompt action is not always taken when parenting cannot be sufficiently improved within children's timescales. A more robust review and a timelier escalation to legal planning meetings are needed.
9. Practitioners take great care to consider cultural sensitivity when undertaking assessments. They take into account the potential influence of religious beliefs and practices on parenting behaviour. Where interpreters and translators are used, care is taken to ensure that they have no connections to the child's immediate community. Inspectors found evidence of some effective and sensitive work around forced marriages. This resulted in effective and proportionate interventions to prevent young women leaving the country, together with ongoing wraparound protection and support. There is a good understanding of the local communities and of their attitudes to and awareness of female genital mutilation. A whole-family approach is considered during assessments. Social workers are well supported by managers. They are helped to be critically reflective about their attitudes and experiences that may influence their practice decisions.
10. Communication with children and young people is a particular strength. It is at the heart of child and family social work. Inspectors are impressed by the skills, sensitivity and creativity of social workers and other practitioners. The recent re-alignment of social work teams has resulted in social workers having more time to develop relationships with children and young people. This can be seen in many forms. Social workers use a range of methods to learn more about children and young people, about their wishes, feelings, moods and experiences and the matters which affect their lives. Direct work positively influences and informs children's assessments.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers is outstanding

11. Children's outcomes significantly improve when they become children in care. Practitioners and managers are highly effective at supporting the long-term stability for children, young people and care leavers during childhood and beyond. A strong focus on permanence planning takes account of children and young people's immediate and future needs. Careful consideration is taken of the relationships between brothers and sisters. Contact arrangements are well considered if brothers and sisters are separated. Children and young people's voices are listened to and heard. Plans are mostly clear and reviews are timely and effective. There is good evidence of Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) scrutiny and challenge with good impact.
12. Consideration of kinship care is particularly strong. Social workers go to great lengths to identify safe family members with whom children can live. Often, there are complex international elements. Not all kinship care is immediately recognised and then regulated as a looked after placement. There is not enough understanding among social workers and their managers of the difference between kinship care and private fostering. If a return home is planned, good risk assessments ensure that it is safe to do so. Where appropriate, placement with parent regulations are used. Senior managers and IROs appropriately ratify the decision. Support plans are well managed and monitored. When care proceedings are issued, statements to court provide professional and justified analysis. The local judiciary and Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service express high confidence in the social work expertise and their legal advice. An increasing number of care applications have complex international elements. While such cases inevitably take additional time, social workers factor this well into their plans. This avoids, where possible, delays in proceedings.
13. Once a decision has been taken that adoption is the right plan for permanence, planning is highly effective. Good liaison between social workers and the adoption team ensures early family finding. Senior managers recognise foster to adopt is underdeveloped and improvement plans are in place and active. The agency decision-maker and adoption panel chair provide close scrutiny and effective challenge. Children are appropriately matched and placed with adopters in a timely way. Performance for the adoption service continues to improve. Adoption recruitment, training and support is highly effective. This ensures that adopters have the right information, knowledge and resources to secure permanence for children. Equal value and investment is given to those carers who wish to become special guardians.
14. When children enter care, good commissioning arrangements ensure that, wherever possible, stable and high-quality placements are available. The vast

majority of children and young people live with foster families. An increasing number are 'in house' due to successful recruitment activity. Efficient screening and assessment processes ensure that only the most appropriate carers are recruited. Enhanced payment incentives are appropriately provided for carers who support children with more complex and challenging needs. This includes support for staying put arrangements. Local recruitment campaigns have been particularly successful in recruiting carers from a wide range of backgrounds. Foster carers have good access to regular training and support.

15. Fewer than 30% of children and young people live in residential care. All live in good or better homes. Placement planning ensures that, wherever possible, children's homes are able to meet the unique needs of each child or young person. If they are placed out of borough, this is most often in response to a safeguarding or complex need. Disruption rates are low but unavoidable for some children and young people. Good preventative support is provided if disruption is anticipated. Lessons are learned from reviews if placements break down. Short breaks for children who have a disability have been judged by Ofsted to be outstanding.
16. Great importance is given to life-story work. This is not viewed as an additional social work task but an important way of helping a child to understand their past and to help them to move into the future. The pace, progress and timing of this work is child-led and available to all children with a plan for permanence. This includes those who leave care through special guardianship. Children and young people benefit as they are helped to understand their histories and experiences.
17. Excellent support is available for children and young people to help them achieve stability in their lives. Strong multi-agency work across partnerships is helping children and young people thrive. Effective health screening and support ensures that children in care and care leavers improve their physical health. Of particular note is how emotional well-being is prioritised. Close attention is paid to the early identification of the impact of trauma. Consequently, children and young people receive a variety of targeted interventions, and this is reducing the need for more specialised interventions. Specialised support is provided for carers and professional consultation is provided for social workers to help them understand the impact of trauma. Where needs escalate, children and young people are promptly triaged and interventions are prioritised and delivered for as long as they are needed.
18. Integrating school inclusion and the virtual school service has had a very positive impact for children. Personal education plans are more meaningful and effective as a result of bespoke and engaging direct work by social workers with children, as well as the work of the virtual school. Children benefit from the very high proportion of schools in Brent that have been

judged to be good or outstanding. Senior managers place high priority on ensuring that children and young people in care attend good schools or alternative provision. A high proportion of children and young people come into care with significant gaps in their learning and attendance, many with complex needs and substantial barriers to overcome. Despite this, they are making better progress in care than they were previously. This is the result of highly effective partnership working. Primary school-aged children achieve well and make substantial progress in their learning. The picture is more mixed in the secondary phase, the overall attendance and achievement at the end of key stage 4 being lower than the national comparators.

19. There has been a significant and positive change in the culture of leaving care services, which is now outstanding. Previously, care leavers' needs were overshadowed by the myriad of improvements that were required in front line safeguarding services. Care leavers now benefit from a service and staff that greatly invest in relationships with young people. Staff value the importance of these relationships and nurture them well. Care leavers are surrounded by strong support networks, and barriers to their progress are overcome by the committed and tenacious staff group. Increased resources and manageable reduced caseloads enable this to happen.
20. Managers pay close scrutiny to ensuring contact with care leavers is meaningful and regular. A strong emphasis is placed on relationship-based practice. Social workers and personal advisers demonstrate considerable empathy, understanding and compassion when talking about 'their' young people. This is valued by care leavers. In the words of one care leaver: 'My PA [personal adviser] is like the mum I didn't have. Her words encourage me to feel better and do better.'
21. Professionals work together effectively to keep care leavers safe and reduce risk, but this is not always well reflected in written plans. Pathway plans are timely and most are completed collaboratively with care leavers. This means that care leavers are involved with and participate in planning for their futures.
22. The local authority is a committed corporate parent. This commitment to improving care leavers' outcomes can be seen in many forms. The vast majority of care leavers remain in care until their 18th birthday. They are encouraged and supported to do so. Where care leavers live in semi-independent accommodation, they are well supported. A panel reviews pathway plans to ensure that the right decisions are made before placements are offered. Child-focused and safe commissioning arrangements ensure that high-quality provision is available. Great care is taken to ensure that care leavers only move into their own independent homes when they are assessed as able to maintain a tenancy. For this reason, there have been no tenancy breakdowns.

23. Where care leavers are parents, personal advisers advocate strongly to ensure the needs of the whole family are addressed. A handy-person service is available, which is providing help and assistance as any good parent would. Good use is made of the setting-up-home allowance. Care leavers benefit from support from their personal advisers to prioritise spending. This is ensuring that best use is made of the allowance. Workshops to assist in tenancy management and budgeting have a positive impact. Most young people have access to all their key documents when they leave care.
24. Managers invest in opportunities to promote training and employment for care leavers. They have increased the number of dedicated apprenticeships. Innovative use of a life coach has improved young people's opportunities and for some has resulted in full-time employment. There is a strong emphasis on enabling and empowering care leavers to reach their full potential. Personal advisers stand alongside care leavers, supporting them to be aspirational. An impressive number of care leavers are supported to access higher education. The support is tailored to the needs of individuals. Care leavers make good use of an emotional well-being help line that has been created with the support of the virtual school. This is providing emotional and practical advice to care leavers in higher education when they need it.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families is good

25. Strong leadership at a political level and throughout the council has prioritised support and care for children in care and care leavers. This has led to significant improvements in the quality of social work practice and the services that children and young people experience. Time and energy has been invested in ensuring that political leaders and members understand the importance of children's social care. This deeper understanding has enabled more robust scrutiny and challenge. The chief executive officer, the director of children's services and the senior leadership team are highly visible to staff. They recognise and prioritise the needs of children and young people. They focus their attention on the things that matter and inspire staff to perform well. As a result, the care of children in care and care leavers is outstanding.
26. There are solid and mature relationships with partner agencies. Priorities are aligned, particularly regarding safeguarding vulnerable adolescents. This collaborative and strategic approach is reflected in the innovative and creative ways in which agencies are working together, and, in particular, to address gang-related activity and sexual exploitation. There needs to be a much stronger operational focus on the correlating relationship between these vulnerabilities and children going missing. There has been a very recent improvement in the response to children going missing, but the pace of change has been too slow.

27. Senior leaders are effective at recognising service areas that require improvement. A detailed and clear self-evaluation accurately identifies strengths and most areas for improvement. Leaders respond well to new challenges and demands. An increased understanding of the needs of vulnerable adolescents has led to three Outcome Based Reviews (OBRs). The OBRs are aimed at identifying with partners innovative ways to support families and young people in the community. The OBRs are themed around domestic abuse, gangs and children on the edge of care. The increased focus on neglect is leading to increasing demand on placements. Senior managers understand well the particular needs of their population and vulnerabilities. They correctly forecast the additional pressure that this will place on budgets.
28. Improved data quality and analysis are facilitating a better understanding of performance and its effectiveness. This is used well to progress improvement. Senior managers understand better what is happening on a daily basis.
29. Quality assurance is improving leaders' understanding of children's experiences. Case audits need to be streamlined and focused. The volume of children's auditing, although much improved, is not consistently leading to positive change. It is not yet driving improvements required in case recording or supervision records. The children with disabilities service and the work of the local authority designated officer are particular areas requiring greater scrutiny. Case recording does not reflect the work undertaken to safeguard children and young people.
30. Corporate parenting is a real strength for the local authority. There is a strong focus on achieving positive outcomes for children in care and care leavers. This is leading to earlier permanence and increasing placement stability. Health and education outcomes are improving. Care leavers are well supported to live safe and healthy lives. High-quality monitoring arrangements ensure that children in care and care leavers live in safe homes. Strong local partnerships provides access to a wide range of effective services when they need them.
31. Since the last inspection, considerable investment and attention has been given to creating the foundations and structures for children's services to improve. The council prioritises resources to attract and retain a stable workforce. The successful realignment and investment in social care services has increased the number of social work teams. The manager-to-staff ratio has been reduced. This enables more time for supervision and management oversight. The number of social workers that children have contact with has reduced. Practitioners now have more time to develop relationships with children and young people. The high value placed on their experiences permeates the service. Staff at all levels regard children and young people's views and expertise as vital sources of knowledge to understand their experiences. This is reflected in the improved quality of assessments, which describe children's needs and histories very well.

32. Senior leaders proactively listen to the views of families, children, staff and partner agencies. This understanding is used to develop and support sustainable change in children's lives. The Care in Action groups are active contributors to corporate parenting discussions, staff training and recruitment. However, the groups are small and participation workers are not reaching out sufficiently to the wide range of children in care and care leavers. It is important that they ensure that it is not only the most vocal or confident young people who are given the chance to make a contribution.
33. Senior leaders recognise that the provision of high-quality social work services relies upon a well-trained, supported and motivated workforce. They have been successful in attracting high-quality managers and social workers. In the past 12 months, the proportion of permanent frontline social work staff has increased to 80% of the total. Senior leaders recognise the challenging environment in which practitioners and managers operate. The safety and well-being of staff is a strategic priority. They have created a culture that is enabling high-quality social work to develop and be sustained. Staff at all levels feel valued and supported. There has been significant investment in ensuring that members of the workforce have the skills and qualities they need to do their jobs well. This investment in staff makes staff want to stay. As a result, they are making a positive difference to children and young people's outcomes.



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