

# Harrow

## Inspection of children's social care services

**Inspection dates: 10 to 14 February 2020**

**Lead inspector: Brenda McLaughlin  
Her Majesty's Inspector**

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

Services for children and young people in Harrow are good. This is an improvement since the 2017 single inspection, when services for help and protection required improvement. Children and families benefit from the work of experienced and skilled early help practitioners, as well as social workers, who persevere to help and support them with a wide range of complex and difficult issues. Most child in need and protection plans are good, but a small number are not specific enough to measure impact.

Strong, stable senior leadership and a closely aligned strategic partnership have brought an unrelenting focus and a shared responsibility to prioritising and building on and sustaining good and excellent practice effectively.

Highly ambitious and resolute professionals work extremely well together to help children in care and care leavers to remain safer and achieve well in life. Managers recognise that more work is needed to ensure that care leavers fully understand their health histories and are provided with consistently good pathway plans. Leaders have acted to strengthen practice evaluation audits so

that they measure the impact on children's experiences and not just compliance with processes. A small number of pupils who access alternative education remain on a reduced timetable for too long. Managers at all levels demonstrate an unwavering ambition to do the right thing.

## **What needs to improve**

- The quality and impact of supervision so that child in need and protection plans address the specific needs of individual children.
- Care leavers need to have access to their (emotional and physical) health histories and pathway plans, which should be of consistently good quality.
- Quality assurance practice evaluation audits across all teams.
- Meeting the needs of pupils with complex needs who are not in mainstream school and who remain on reduced timetables for too long.

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

1. Well-established and appropriately targeted early help services, delivered across three hubs, provide vulnerable children and young people with locally accessible and timely help and protection. Sustained improvements since the previous inspection, when help and protection services required improvement, mean that children and their families are helped and protected sooner. Purposeful work led by the local authority and supported by a committed strategic safeguarding partnership is helping to provide a seamless service to Harrow's most vulnerable residents.
2. Thresholds between early help and social care are well understood, and are applied appropriately in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). The co-location of experienced and dedicated early help practitioners ensures that the pathway into early help is clear. Partner agencies are well represented, and communication with other professionals who are not co-located is effective. Consequently, children and families get the right level of help and protection at the right time. Experienced MASH social workers swiftly screen contacts. The issue of consent is carefully considered, and is overridden if required. Daily multi-agency meetings assess all police referrals, considering risks to children missing from home and care and those vulnerable to violence and exploitation, as well as children living with high parental conflict. Child-centred, clearly recorded decisions ensure that children's experiences are always central to the next steps that are needed to help and protect them from harm.
3. Appropriate action is taken to safeguard and protect children who are at immediate risk of significant harm. Strategy meetings are thorough and most involve a good range of agencies. This includes those meetings that are conducted out of hours by the highly experienced and effective emergency duty

team. Interventions are proportionate to risk, and, when children and young people need to be safeguarded, actions are taken promptly to ensure that children and young people are kept safe. Escalating or emerging risk, such as concerns about forced marriage, domestic abuse and abduction, are swiftly identified and effectively addressed via collaborative multi-agency work, including the application for court orders. Harm to homeless young people and those at risk of radicalisation is recognised at an early stage and responded to effectively.

4. Experienced social workers in the first response teams (FRT) and in the child in need (CIN) long-term service know their children well. Caseloads are high for some, particularly in FRT after a week on duty. Although social workers report that these are mostly manageable, leaders accept that good practice could be compromised unless capacity in these teams is strengthened.
5. Most visits to children are regular, purposeful and responsive to their circumstances. Children's views are diligently captured by skilled direct work and are used to inform planning and to assess improvements. Assessments are comprehensive, timely and of good quality. They are informed by previous history. The child's culture is reflected well and is fully considered. So, too, is the impact on children of poor parental mental health, domestic violence and substance misuse. Social workers demonstrate a good understanding of the impact of traumatic experiences on children's lives.
6. Committed social workers across all teams speak openly and authoritatively about the families they are working with, and they are proud of children's achievements. Practitioners are clear about the emotional impact on children when parents are unable to prioritise their needs. Together with competent early help staff and the 'keeping families together' team (edge of care), they see children alone to seek their views. They offer appropriate challenge to parents when required. This work clearly informs assessments and plans, and is making a real difference to help and protect children. The work by the recently appointed skilled PAMS (parenting assessment manual) workers adds value and reduces delays to children subject to public law outline (PLO) pre-proceedings assessments.
7. The judiciary spoke positively about the practice in Harrow, but there is some concern that applications to the family courts should have happened earlier for several children. This includes some children who have experienced neglect and have been known to a number of services over a prolonged period and wait too long.
8. Child protection conferences are mostly timely, and multi-agency core groups are held regularly, and are used effectively to review and update child protection plans. However, the quality of child in need and child protection plans is variable. Not all actions are clear. Where there are no timescales, it is difficult to measure progress for specific children. This leads to drift for some. Although supervision

is regular, a continuous evaluation of whether the child's experiences are understood and whether interventions are sustaining changes needs to be recorded.

9. Services for children and young people who go missing and those at risk of sexual and criminal exploitation and gangs are good and improving. Leaders, in collaboration with partners, have responded well to the outcome of a commissioned peer review on November 2019. They have enhanced the capacity of the multi-agency vulnerable to violence and exploitation team (VVE). The team now takes case responsibility for the high-risk children in need and child protection cases. The work of the VVE team has greatly improved multi-disciplinary communication and is enabling better coordination with other services, including learning from return home interviews and increased joint work with the community safety team.
10. Children with disabilities and their families benefit from a broad range of services that are delivered by passionate and committed workers. Risks and needs are very well identified, and are addressed in good plans. The co-location of the service with partners such as the special educational needs service is facilitating communication and planning, and this is reflected in strong partner agency involvement in plans and reviews. There is a good commitment to working constructively with parents and carers. Visits to children demonstrate sustained efforts by workers to elicit children and young people's views by a variety of communication methods.
11. Privately fostered children benefit from appropriate care that is meeting their needs. They are visited regularly, and their living arrangements are appropriately monitored and reviewed.
12. The management of allegations regarding adults in a position of trust is strong. Thresholds for referral are understood and applied consistently. Investigations are coordinated well to ensure that children are protected.
13. Most electively home educated children and those missing from school benefit from vigilant scrutiny by the local authority officers, who work successfully with other agencies to safeguard vulnerable children from harm. Some pupils with highly complex needs, who are not in mainstream school but are provided with alternative education, experience drift as they remain on a reduced timetable for too long.

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

14. When children come into care, they receive a very good service. Staff at all levels work tirelessly to help children in care and care leavers to achieve in life and protect them from further harm. Children are matched carefully with carers

who promote their needs and help them to achieve. Social workers and personal advisers (PAs) work steadfastly to advocate on behalf of care leavers to ensure that they receive the best support to move safely towards independence.

15. Permanence planning and stability for children in care is good. Long-term plans for all children are considered promptly at the monthly care planning group. Parallel planning for those children unable to live safely with their parents is progressed speedily. Appropriate use of family group conferences and special guardians allows children to live with family members. Most children live in safe, stable, good-quality placements that meet their needs, with their brothers and sisters and extended family or carers, who provide them with emotional warmth and stability.
16. Social workers know their children in care well and are active and committed advocates for them. They demonstrate an understanding of key factors that contribute to children's stability in their placement and the impact of the child's unique experiences. A mainly permanent social work staff team means that most children are benefiting from consistent and established relationships with someone they know well. Visits are regular, including for those children living at a distance from Harrow. Children are visited according to their needs, with many examples of increased visits when they are worried or upset. Sensitive, thoughtful and creative life-story work is helping most children to understand their experiences, for instance the use of sensory tools, smell and touch, which engender memory and help children understand why they cannot live with their parents.
17. A sensitive approach taken to engage and support birth families to maintain contact with children has a positive impact on children's emotional needs. This also contributes to the stability of placements. Careful consideration is given to sustaining relationships with brothers and sisters in future permanence plans. Children are supported to participate in their reviews, with independent reviewing officers (IROs) providing effective oversight and challenge. Children in care are offered the opportunity for advocacy, as well as independent visitors.
18. Children's physical, emotional and mental health needs are closely monitored and supported throughout their placement. A dedicated clinical psychologist attached to the virtual school supports professionals and young people and carers. Children can also access support via the jointly commissioned early intervention treatment and support via Harrow Horizons project.
19. The well-established fostering service has been successful in recruiting and supporting a range of foster and connected carers to meet the diverse needs of the children in Harrow. Foster carers' passion about helping and protecting children is a real strength of the service. Experienced carers offer a range of specialist services, including life-story work, caring for teenagers and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. They provide outreach support and mentoring for families and for each other.

20. The local authority has smoothly transitioned its partnership arrangements with a voluntary adoption agency into a regional adoption agency. There are no children waiting for adoption because early permanency planning is effective, which is ensuring that children are placed in adoptive homes quickly. Adopters describe positive experiences of their contact with the regional workers. They feel welcomed and valued. Adopters are offered a continued high-quality adoption support service in the region or via the adoption support fund for more specialist services.
21. The virtual school's philosophy is 'Achieving Excellence Together', with the child at the heart of the school's programmes. Education, training and employment outcomes for children in care and care leavers are good, and children achieve well across all key stages. Schools are complimentary about the support offered by the virtual school team (VST). They believe the team to be approachable and efficient. School leaders say that, often, the VST staff will go 'over and above' to support the pupils. Electronic personal education plans are detailed, focus on the key areas, and include pupil targets and the pupils' perspectives. A range of extra-curricular activities are available to support and enrich the lives of children in care.
22. The virtual school is proud of its achievements to date. Staff know that although attendance has improved, there is more to do. This is an area of priority. The virtual school carefully tracks the progress of all pupils and is quick to intercede should a child's attendance start to reduce. At the time of the inspection, there were six pupils with highly complex needs who, despite constant efforts by all agencies, were without a school place for several months without a resolution.
23. Most care leavers live in suitable accommodation. The local authority actively commissions good-quality supportive accommodation according to individual assessed need. Consequently, there are no young people in unregistered provision. Young people said that they feel safe and can readily access advice, support and guidance to help them to move towards managing their own tenancies. Comparatively high numbers of young people are engaged in purposeful education, employment and training (EET) activities. Tenacious efforts by genuinely concerned and caring staff help most young people 'stay in touch'. Social workers and personal advisers take pride in young people's achievements.
24. Senior leaders are aware that the transition from child in care to care leaver is not as smooth as it needs to be, and they have plans to integrate the existing separate teams. The quality and effectiveness of early pathway planning is variable. Some young people do not have an up-to-date pathway plan. Risks to most young people are well identified but not in all cases. They are not consistently reviewed to reflect changing risks and to inform planning. Care leavers told inspectors that they are not provided with their (emotional and physical) health histories.

## **The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: good**

25. The local authority has a strong and sustained track record of well-established and effective strategic relationship with all relevant partners who are committed to working together to provide consistently high-quality services. They have a clear understanding and a well-aligned creative approach to prioritising the needs of children, young people and their families in Harrow. They work untiringly, driving development to meet the increasing levels of demand. Corporate leaders and elected members have tangible high aspirations, demonstrated by continuous financial support.
26. Since the Ofsted single inspection in 2017, strong, effective and stable senior leadership has led to sustained improvements in both the quality and impact of social work practice for children in need of help and protection, and those in care. Leaders have successfully created a culture of high support and professional accountability, but they are not complacent.
27. All core services are now good, and there are many examples of excellent child- and family-centred practice, for instance work with the Asian Woman's Network to support victims of domestic abuse. Recent action to improve the care leaver services is positive, but it is too soon to evaluate impact. Robust collaborative partnership arrangements effectively target and commission resources to meet local need. For example, good joint collaborative multi-agency practice protects exploited and missing children. Underpinning all the work in Harrow is the quiet determination by committed leaders and managers to do the right thing to help and protect their most vulnerable residents.
28. Senior leaders have a comprehensive knowledge of the strengths and areas for improvement and are quickly responsive to external challenge. Leaders describe a vision, shared by elected members, of strong and continually improving services. Leaders know and understand the diverse needs of their communities well. They have repeatedly taken the right steps to meet them by consolidating good performance and ensuring continued improvement. Leaders are very ambitious in developing and promoting cogent evidence-based and innovative pilot projects that are making a difference. This includes collaboration with universities to trial finger-print analysis with parents who are dependent on drugs and alcohol.
29. Strong governance arrangements and clear lines of accountability between the chief executive, the director of children services and elected members are in place. Key strengths and areas for development, identified in their self-assessment, are used to inform both management understanding of the quality of practice and individual staff development. A strengths-based performance framework supports the delivery of good services, leading to sustained improvement across most teams and services. Senior managers



recognise that they have more work to do to move to a culture of measuring impact and outcomes, rather than merely processes, particularly following practice evaluations.

30. Successful implementation of the revised workforce strategy has led to significant improvements in increasing the ratio of permanent staff across children's services. Effective planning, access to good-quality training and a strong focus on innovation have led to the local authority retaining a stable workforce of good, qualified, experienced social workers and early help practitioners.
31. A diverse workforce of practitioners and managers who reflect the local community is a real strength, leading to better engagement by young people and their parents. All recent workers recruited from overseas report positively on the support, assistance and training they have received to understand the cultural and legal context of working with children in England. Newly qualified social workers are supported well. This provides a sound basis for sustaining good work with families.
32. Staff consistently reported to inspectors that they feel very well supported in their work and professional development by highly visible, approachable and involved managers. Case work in most teams is manageable. Morale is good. Harrow is a good place to work, and vulnerable children and their families have the benefit of good-quality help and support.

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