

London Borough of Islington

Inspection of children's social care services

Inspection dates: 9 March 2020 to 13 March 2020

Lead inspector: Nicola Bennett
Her Majesty's Inspector

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

Children in Islington benefit from services that have gone from strength to strength since the last inspection in 2017, when they were judged good overall, and outstanding for leadership, management and governance. Senior leaders and members of the council demonstrate an unwavering commitment to improving and enriching the lives of children and their families. This is evidenced by the significant and sustained investment in children's services, and by the wide range of highly successful initiatives that are having a positive impact on children and their families, whatever their level of need. Highly skilled and experienced staff listen carefully to children to understand their needs and ensure that plans are effective.

Senior leaders promote a strong culture of learning and development and have built on the findings of the focused visit and the joint targeted area inspection in 2018. Partnership working is strong and well established and has contributed to the development and successful implementation of many creative and innovative services. Senior managers have an accurate picture of the quality of practice and services delivered in Islington and the improvements that are still required, through highly effective performance information and quality assurance systems. Staff receive high-quality support and take great pride in their work.

What needs to improve

- The timeliness and quality of planning for children at high risk in the community, when they are placed back with their parents while alternative accommodation is sought.
- The engagement of care leavers in pathway planning and the consistent provision of health histories.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: outstanding

1. Children and families in Islington benefit from well-established and appropriately targeted early help services. Services provide high-quality support to families who are experiencing a wide range of complex issues. Timely and thorough assessments, plans and reviews enable professionals and families to evaluate the effectiveness of early help services in addressing issues and sustaining improvements.
2. Thresholds between early help and social care are well understood and applied appropriately. Escalating risk or need is recognised and results in timely referrals to children's social care, followed by a swift response. Since the last inspection, the local authority has introduced the co-location of highly experienced and dedicated early help and mental health practitioners in the children's services contact team. This is a significant strength and results in early signposting to specialist services to meet children's needs.
3. Timely communication with the police and other professionals within the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) and external partners results in prompt help and protection for children. Experienced and knowledgeable social workers screen contacts without delay. The 'no names' telephone consultation service is well used and valued by professionals and provides an effective service. Parental consent is carefully considered and overridden as necessary. Children's experiences are clearly recorded and inform decisions regarding the level of services required to address their identified needs.
4. Prompt and effective action is taken to safeguard and protect children who are at immediate risk of harm. Strategy discussions are thorough, and, following the joint targeted area inspection in 2018, senior leaders have successfully addressed concerns regarding the attendance of some partner agencies at these meetings. As a result, the police now attend the vast majority of strategy meetings and contribute effectively to information-sharing, the evaluation of risk, and planning. The emergency duty team provides an effective service out of hours, ensuring that protective action is taken to safeguard children.
5. Young people who are presenting as homeless receive timely and sensitive responses. Thorough social work assessments identify risks and needs well, and young people are provided with support that takes account of their individual needs.

6. Children who are privately fostered are supported well. Regular visiting and supervision ensure effective oversight of changing circumstances so that children are protected, and their welfare is promoted.
7. Allegations against adults who work or volunteer with children are taken seriously and responded to swiftly. Thresholds are understood across the partnership and applied consistently. Investigations are well coordinated to ensure that children are protected.
8. Visits to children are regular, purposeful and responsive to children's circumstances. Social workers see children alone and undertake skilled, direct work to capture their views and understand their experiences, and this information is then used to inform assessments and plans. Good use is made of the consultation services offered by specialist mental health and exploitation professionals to inform assessments and plans. Comprehensive, authoritative assessments are informed by family history and culture and capture children's experiences effectively. The impact on children of parental trauma, as well as substance misuse, domestic abuse and mental ill-health, is well considered and evaluated.
9. Child protection conferences are timely, and multi-agency reviews are held regularly to review and update children's plans. Almost all plans are of good quality; they are appropriately evaluative and well targeted, with achievable and measurable actions. Plans are progressed in a timely way and lead to risks being reduced. Collaborative, well-coordinated multi-agency interventions such as child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), the adolescent multi-agency support service, the targeted youth service and The Lighthouse, for children who have experienced sexual abuse, all make a positive contribution to improving the lives of children. When risks are reduced, partner agencies, as the lead professional, continue to support children.
10. Disabled children and their families receive timely responses that take into account parental support and the child's needs. Children and their families benefit from a broad range of services delivered by committed social workers and professionals across the partnership. The needs of children in the family who are not disabled are also fully considered. Risks and needs are very well identified and integrated into plans that are informed by regular and purposeful visiting. Assessments and plans identify children's needs well and clearly show how these needs will be met.
11. Dedicated, highly experienced social workers in child in need teams are ambitious for children and have a clear and determined focus on improving their lives. A stable workforce and manageable caseloads enable social workers to develop positive and enduring relationships with children. The local authority's preferred social work model is well embedded, and workers demonstrate a good understanding of the impact of trauma on children's lives. Practitioners build effective relationships with parents and provide appropriate challenge.

12. Supervision and management oversight are regular, and social workers describe receiving good-quality, reflective supervision. However, a small number of records are not comprehensive or timebound, or they are overly focused on parental need.
13. Children and young people at risk of sexual and criminal exploitation and gang involvement receive a highly effective response. Creative and persistent efforts are made by exceptionally knowledgeable and skilled practitioners in the 'exploitation and missing' team and the integrated gangs unit to locate and engage with children who go missing. The identification and understanding of risk for children facing exploitation are sophisticated and impressive. The quality of return home interviews has improved significantly since the last inspection; they are now of consistently high quality and they are promptly shared. This informs effective disruption, prevention and safeguarding activity, which reduces risk for these highly complex and vulnerable children and young people.
14. Professionals make timely referrals when they have concerns about the potential radicalisation of children. Responses are considered and proportionate to the needs of any children identified as being at risk of harm.
15. Senior leaders have established clear and comprehensive arrangements to identify and respond to children who are missing from education or who are electively home educated. Strong and collaborative partnerships ensure that vulnerable children are safeguarded effectively.

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

16. Services for children in care and care leavers continue to be good and are improving. Most children receive a service that meets their needs well.
17. In most cases, when children's circumstances do not improve, timely and appropriate decisions are made for them to come into care. Legal planning meetings and the pre-proceedings stage of the public law outline arrangements are mostly effective, although a small number of children have had repeat episodes of being on a child protection plan before being considered at a legal planning meeting. The judiciary speaks highly of social workers in Islington. The quality of assessments is good, and care plans are well evidenced to inform decision-making and the timely conclusion of proceedings.
18. When children come into care, they receive a good service. Children are carefully matched with experienced, well-supported and skilled carers, who promote their individual and cultural needs. Social workers and other professionals work tirelessly to help children to feel safe, to recover from trauma and to achieve. Risks are assessed and responded to well, and practical arrangements are put in place quickly to help to meet children's needs.
19. Most children in care live in safe, stable, good-quality placements that meet their needs, with experienced carers who provide them with emotional warmth, stability

and the nurturing that they need to develop confidence and overcome adversity. Permanence for all children is considered early, and alternative plans are progressed speedily for children who are unable to live safely with their families. Innovative approaches to family finding result in children living in high-quality homes together with their brothers and sisters. However, although family group conferences routinely take place, and respond to children's immediate support or care needs, they do not consistently consider or identify alternative carers within the family. Nevertheless, the local authority makes good use of special guardianship and fostering arrangements, to enable children to live with family members if appropriate.

20. Experienced, highly skilled and confident social workers know their children well. They have high aspirations for children and young people and advocate on their behalf to ensure access to the services that they need. Co-location of mental health specialists with social workers promotes early consideration and provision of services to address children's emotional needs. As a result, children's experiences improve when they come into care. Children's interests, hobbies and activities are actively encouraged and supported; this assists them to develop confidence and skills and to socialise. The stability of the social work staff team means that most children benefit from consistent and established relationships with their social worker.
21. Social workers undertake regular visits to children in care, including those children living at a distance from Islington. Although visits are regularly undertaken, records of visits are not always up to date. Children's wishes and feelings are actively sought and acted on. Social workers undertake sensitive, thoughtful and creative life-story work, which helps children to understand the reasons for being in care.
22. Thorough assessments and well-coordinated and timely multi-agency plans and reviews ensure that children's changing needs are recognised and addressed. Children are supported to attend their reviews, and independent reviewing officers (IROs) provide effective oversight and challenge in the majority of cases. Children's health and education needs are carefully considered, and they have good access to advocates and independent visitors.
23. Most children who have been placed back with their parents by the local authority are appropriately cared for, and their needs are well met. However, a very small number of young people at high risk of exploitation and gang involvement, whose placements have broken down, have been placed with their parents while extensive searches are undertaken for more suitable placements. Managers have not ensured that safety and contingency plans are in place to try to mitigate these risks, and oversight of plans by senior managers, social workers and IROs has not been sufficiently rigorous. As a result, these young people have continued to be at high risk. When inspectors identified this issue, senior managers took immediate action to address the concerns and to prevent re-occurrence.
24. A review and a re-structuring of fostering services have improved placement stability and increased the range of fostering and connected carer placements to meet the complex and diverse needs of children in care. An emphasis on providing specialist

training to supervising social workers and foster carers, supported by clinicians within the service, is making a difference to placement stability, as well as the capacity of carers to understand and meet the needs of the children in their care. Experienced and passionate carers offer a range of specialist services and support groups, enabling them to care for teenagers, brothers and sisters and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

25. Senior managers have been instrumental in the strategy and planning which has supported the smooth transition into the regional adoption agency, Adopt London North, hosted by Islington. Effective early permanency planning ensures that children are placed in adoptive homes quickly; no children are waiting to be adopted. A proactive approach to adoption support ensures that adopters have the right support at the right time to enable children to live in settled and stable homes.
26. The virtual school is well led, and school staff and those from the virtual school know their children well. As a result, the curriculum offered is tailored well to meet their specific needs. Over time, children make good progress from their starting points, both academically and socially. The pupil premium is used well to support progress. The quality of personal education plans for school-aged children has improved since the previous inspection, and these plans are now good. A good range of enrichment and extra-curricular activities helps children and young people to pursue their interests and to develop their broader skills and knowledge. Young people are well prepared for their next steps when they leave school. As a result, an increasing proportion of young people remain in education and training when they start Year 12.
27. The large majority of children in care attend school regularly. The percentage of children who are persistently absent from school is reducing, but it is still higher than in similar local authorities. The number of children who experience fixed-term exclusions is increasing. Staff in the virtual school and partner agencies are continuing to make determined efforts to improve these figures. Equally, the proportion of 17- to 21-year olds who are not in education, employment or training is higher than that of similar authorities. Tackling this issue is a priority for the local authority, which has put in place additional financial and staff support to assist young people.
28. Care leavers live in suitable accommodation and are helped to move towards independence and to manage their own tenancies at their own pace. Care leavers have many opportunities to get involved with and influence how the service is run, and their views are carefully considered.
29. Young people benefit from stable, trusting relationships with workers who find creative ways to meet and engage with them. The local authority is in touch with the majority of its care leavers, and workers are persistent in their efforts to see young people, ascertain their welfare and provide the right support.

30. Pathway plans are routinely in place; they are of good quality and they are mostly up to date. The majority of plans capture young people's views. Good consideration is given to past history and trauma, and this contributes to clear action planning. However, some care leavers do not have opportunities to be involved in their pathway plans and do not routinely receive copies of these plans. Health histories are not routinely provided to care leavers in order to help them to make informed choices in relation to future medical treatment.
31. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are very well supported in accommodation that meets their needs. A high-quality bespoke project assists and develops the skills of carers and offers consultation to social workers to better meet the needs of these young people. As a result, the young people make progress and benefit from being in care and from the support provided to them as care leavers.
32. Care leavers benefit from access to an employment specialist, who works with them to access work, apprenticeships and further education that meets their needs. The House Project is an innovative and highly valued service that is making a significant difference for care leavers. The service helps young people to build confidence and to make friends for life, through preparation for independence and the provision of secure and affordable accommodation. Young people said to inspectors that being involved in the project makes them feel like they have a family.
33. The Children in Care Council is highly influential within and across Islington. The chair and vice-chair are both care leavers, and many children in care and care leavers have been engaged in a wide variety of projects, including the delivery of training and the recruitment of staff at all levels of children's services.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: outstanding

34. Corporate and political leaders demonstrate a strong and sustained commitment to improving the lives of children, young people and their families in Islington. Senior leaders are highly aspirational in their approach and ambition for all children to have access to opportunities and services that enhance their lives, and to help them to achieve and flourish as adults. Strong and effective senior leadership has led to continued improvements to both the quality and impact of social work practice for children in need of help and protection, those in care and care leavers.
35. Sustained investment in early help and universal services means that families can access high-quality help when needs first arise. Clear, shared priorities across the local authority, the Islington safeguarding children partnership (ISCP) and other agencies have resulted in highly effective, joined-up commissioning and co-location of services that are making a difference for children. This successful approach is now to be rolled out across all local authority departments. Senior leaders have significantly increased financial investment in children's services, such as in the violence against women and girls (VAWG) project, and they have created a group of specialist foster carers to care for children with highly complex needs.

36. Senior leaders have a comprehensive knowledge of the strengths and areas for development in children's services, and they respond quickly when improvements are needed. For example, robust collaborative partnerships have led to significant improvements in the identification of and response to children and young people at risk of sexual abuse and the subsequent development of services to meet local need effectively.
37. Clear lines of accountability and mature relationships between the chief executive, the director of children's services and elected members ensure that performance is effectively and regularly scrutinised. Leaders strive for ongoing practice improvement. They have embedded rigorous quality assurance processes, which have enabled a comprehensive knowledge of performance strengths and areas for improvement. Audit activity is widespread, and twice-yearly practice weeks, which involve senior leaders, provide a clear understanding and oversight of the quality of frontline practice. Learning from audit activity is used well to inform and improve service developments and practice.
38. Senior leaders in Islington are very committed to learning and innovation. Their relentless focus on improving services and providing opportunities to help children, young people and their families is evident in the introduction of a wide range of innovative projects. For example, the 11 by 11 project has been established to ensure that all children attending a school in Islington have 11 outstanding cultural experiences by Year 11, and the multi-disciplinary Keel project works with families experiencing domestic violence and abuse to improve long-term outcomes for children. Most schools have received training on the social work model of practice, to enable better understanding of and response to the causes of children's behaviour, and a transition project to support vulnerable children moving from primary to secondary school is in place. Both initiatives are making a difference and transforming lives. The co-location of specialist CAMHS workers at the 'front door' and within teams provides real benefits through early consultations, assessments and interventions that are helping children.
39. The local authority and senior leaders have high aspirations for children in care and care leavers, who have influence and inform service developments and delivery. The children and young people have an active role in the corporate parenting board, their successes are celebrated and they have the opportunity to partake in many cultural and social experiences.
40. Senior leaders have taken decisive action to recruit highly skilled foster carers to provide care for a small number of children with complex needs. This initiative, accompanied by highly effective commissioning arrangements, means that children and young people live in stable placements or accommodation that is well matched and meets their needs.
41. Significant investment in children's services means that social workers have manageable caseloads. Effective planning, access to good-quality training and a

strong focus on relationship-based practice have attracted highly skilled and experienced social workers to Islington. Staff are very positive about the support and opportunities available and speak passionately about the practice model and how it informs their approach and interventions. The social work model is now well embedded and contributes to good and outstanding practice across all services, which is making a significant difference for children and families and is transforming lives.



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