

Inspection of Camden local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 25 to 29 April 2022

Lead inspector: Steve Lowe, 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	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding

Children in the London Borough of Camden benefit from good and outstanding services, some of which have been sustained over many years while others have further improved. They are protected and cared for by a highly effective collegial response to contemporary social issues. Practitioners and senior leaders identify potential harm and respond quickly with services that are designed by and with the community. This approach has been highly effective in reducing incidents of knife crime and violence. Similarly, practice has been developed to address the risks of child exploitation effectively and mitigate the emotional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on families. Such commendable achievements have occurred in the context of the borough creating a well-resourced and compassionate welcome for a significant number of families seeking asylum from Afghanistan.

Relationships that value culture, identity and the uniqueness of each individual underpin social work practice in Camden. Early help consistently helps families to work things out for themselves and to stay together with a brighter future. Partnerships are highly effective, exemplifying a focus on prevention rather than intervention.

Children in care and those who look after them have high aspirations for the future, regardless of the complexity of children's needs. Children receive exceptional care and support and are protected decisively from harm when required. The pathways to independence programme, alongside an unerring focus on educational provision,

gives children a solid base from which to follow their ambitions and interests. This will support them to achieve in later life. The provision of specialist clinicians helps children manage their anxieties and trauma without delay.

There are a very small number of exceptions to what is otherwise exemplary practice, which senior leaders have begun to address.

What needs to improve?

- The execution of the local authority designated officer (LADO) duties when allegations are made against those in a position of trust.
- Support from social workers in the emergency duty team (EDT) to children who become subject to the powers of police protection.

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

1. Children in need of help and protection are identified quickly, securing the right help at the right time. A clear and concerted focus on helping families identify solutions for themselves ensures that statutory services are not involved in their lives for any longer than is necessary.
2. Decision-making at the 'front door' (the first point of contact for families and professionals) is timely for nearly all children, and appropriate decisions are made to direct families to either early help or statutory services. In a few cases, there are delays in information coming from the police, delaying the screening of the information and a determination of the most appropriate course of action.
3. Children receive focused and purposeful help from skilled early help practitioners that is making a real difference. Camden early help services are well resourced, and children and families benefit from a wide choice of support and community-based services. Thresholds are well understood and applied appropriately, with a considered approach to managing more complex work in early help specialist services when this best suits the family.
4. When families make contact outside daytime hours, EDT maintains contact with referrers and ensures a timely and seamless handover to daytime colleagues. However, when police use their emergency powers of protection, EDT does not always arrange for children to be accompanied by social workers or advocates to ensure that they are supported at a time of distress.
5. Children at risk of significant harm are identified quickly and the response is swift and effective. Strategy meetings include partners' views, are well recorded and set out clear accountabilities for completing enquiries and assessment. The use of review strategy meetings at the end of investigations had become

customary. Although becoming less prevalent now, clear recording of the rationale for why they are being held could be strengthened.

6. Social workers and their managers think very deeply about the most effective ways to support families. For example, there has been a recent trend in child protection (section 47 enquiries) that do not progress to initial child protection conference or a child protection plan. Senior leaders have begun to analyse this shift to fully unpick whether families are being subjected to unnecessary statutory interventions.
7. Children have positive and productive relationships with social workers. They are seen regularly, on their own and in places where they feel comfortable. Social workers build strong relationships with children through play, having fun and working out what they have in common, resulting in purposeful visits and support.
8. The quality and impact of social work fundamentals constitute a strength in Camden. Senior practitioners and managers set out thorough and child-focused assessment plans before assessments start, and regularly review progress. Assessments holistically consider risks, family history, strengths and parenting capacity and the impact that they have on children's lives. All these dimensions are thoroughly considered and used to inform decisions about next steps.
9. Assessments reach conclusions and recommendations that are appropriate for children and their families and in a timescale that is right for them. They are refined and ratified by managers who clearly articulate the next steps. This leads to plans which are simple and focused on the right things.
10. Camden's long-standing use of family group conferencing effectively avoids children having to leave their homes or their family when it is safe for them to remain. This approach goes beyond family meetings. The support of peer mentors and advocates, person-centred meetings and the involvement of experts with experience in shaping the service has created a dynamic and responsive approach to creating supportive networks.
11. When children require more formal child protection planning, families are clear about the route to sustainable change. When risks to children increase, appropriate and authoritative action is taken. Plans are made at conferences which are well attended by parents and professionals. Although children do not always attend their own meetings, their wishes and views are captured and presented by those who know them best.
12. When risks to children continue, there is a clear and comprehensive system in place to track and review cases through care pathways, legal planning meetings and the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline. The number of families that are diverted out of this process is impressive, with two-thirds of children experiencing a reduction in risks and no further need of protection through legal means. While the letters before proceedings are sometimes overly jargonistic, with the cause for concern being lost in a chronology of events, managers are aware of this and are taking appropriate action.

13. Children at risk of, or who have experienced, exploitation receive a well-coordinated multi-agency response, and when children go missing the response is intelligent and compassionate. There is effective strategic oversight of children at risk of exploitation, and regular tracking of progress through risk assessments and response meetings that mobilise safety planning and disruption. The missing and child exploitation analysts have good oversight of cases throughout and inform various pathways to risk reduction at the operational multi-agency child exploitation meetings.
14. Children with specific vulnerabilities receive a consistent response. Disabled children are seen regularly and their social workers are highly skilled at finding the best way to communicate with them. Systems to monitor children who are electively home educated or missing from education are well coordinated. There is good oversight to cover the extra work that rising numbers through the pandemic have created. However, the numbers of children missing education are stabilising and recent developments enable early identification of those who may be at risk.
15. The response from the LADO to allegations against professionals has been inconsistent during recent staffing changes. Leaders took initial steps to remedy this during the inspection.

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

16. Children in the care of Camden receive an outstanding service from workers who know them exceptionally well and use these relationships to fully respond to their needs as unique individuals.
17. Children only come into care if it is necessary and appropriate for them to do so. The vast majority of children are given placements that are suitable and meet their needs. There is careful matching of foster carers and children, and children's cultural and other identity needs are very well considered.
18. In line with the rest of the country, a small number of children with complex needs may experience several placement moves before a permanent placement is found for them. Social workers demonstrate thoughtful and child-focused practice in supporting these children, to mitigate the impact of such moves.
19. From August 2021, due to a range of factors, an unprecedented number of unaccompanied children seeking asylum from Afghanistan have arrived in Camden. Many of these children have been accommodated as children in care. Experienced workers sensitively support unaccompanied children, carefully assessing their individual experiences and identity. Children are quickly supported into education, their individual health needs are promptly responded to, and they are guided effectively through Home Office processes.
20. Children's wishes and feelings fully shape and inform their care plans. Plans are thorough and robust and address children's wide-ranging needs. Children's plans are reviewed regularly and children are encouraged to be part of their

review meetings. If they choose not to attend, their wishes are clearly presented and considered.

21. Social workers demonstrate persistence and creativity in building relationships with children. They consider all elements of children's individual experiences and identities. Work with children is purposeful and ambitious. Independent reviewing officers advocate and challenge effectively on behalf of children.
22. Risks faced by children in care are recognised and responded to promptly and effectively. The response to children in care who are at risk of exploitation or to those who go missing from care is extremely strong and has a discernible and positive impact on their protection and outcomes.
23. Children in care and care leavers have their routine and emergency health needs met and they receive prompt support from specialist health agencies when needed. A multi-agency child and adolescent mental health services presence within the children in care team supports their emotional health quickly, responding to their anxieties and trauma, including for those who have travelled from overseas. Children have access to a wide range of social and recreational opportunities, from equine therapy to film-making.
24. Children are encouraged and supported to make good educational progress. When children in care are not attending school, professionals work together effectively to try and support them back into school. Those unaccompanied asylum-seeking children awaiting confirmation of their leave to remain are purposefully engaged so that they are ready to pursue employment and their chosen careers.
25. Children in care are settled and protected where they live. Family time is carefully assessed and promoted in the best interests of children. Permanency plans are considered at a very early stage for children. Every effort is made to allow children to remain living with their birth families, and the family group conference service actively supports their safe return home. Timely and thorough assessments of potential carers prevent delay in securing permanence for children.
26. Adoption is considered as a potential option for children when appropriate, although this is rarely necessary as preventative services are so successful at securing permanency at home. For the very small number of children it affects, the pace of parallel planning is not always obvious and there could be greater use of foster to adopt placements.
27. When children in Camden leave care, they are well supported by their personal advisers (PAs) in a service that is aspirational for them. There are a wide range of services available for care leavers to meet their needs. The care leavers service is rooted in relational practice, which means that PAs build warm professional relationships and show pride in young people's achievements. Care leavers report that their relationship with their PA inspires them to succeed.
28. While the local offer to care leavers is comprehensive, leaders acknowledge that it needs to be refreshed, and they are working to establish a pan-London

arrangement. In the meantime, care leavers receive exhaustive support from the local authority and the rich cultural offer from partners in the community.

29. Care leavers benefit from a wide range of services to support their emotional health. This is exemplified by the multidisciplinary 'minding the gap' panel which identifies the most appropriate resource or service for young people when they are struggling with their mental health.
30. Care leavers predominantly live in suitable and safe accommodation. Reciprocal arrangements with other local authorities mean those living out of Camden have access to appropriate accommodation options. The peerless stepped approach provided through the housing pathway is helping care leavers to live independently in their own accommodation at a time when they are ready to do so.
31. Many young people have the opportunity to remain living with their former foster carers. For some, this provides continuity of support while they are in higher education or at university and while they are developing their independence skills.

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

32. The whole council, from the leader through to the lead member, chief executive, director of children's services and senior leaders, recognises the needs of children and develops strategies to minimise imminent and upcoming risks to the community before such risks become a crisis. Resilience and resetting services in the wake of the pandemic are key examples illustrating how leaders pre-empt rather than react. The concerted and agile response to the sudden influx of people from Afghanistan seeking asylum was particularly impressive and involved key partners both inside and outside the borough. This ensured that these families are protected and well informed, and are supported quickly. The success of these responses is made possible by solid practice foundations and well-established services that have sustained a high quality over many years.
33. Corporate decision-making is dynamic, informed and shaped by children and families at all levels of the organisation. Partnerships with parents and youth advisory boards and meaningful engagement with children are central to the ethos of activism and activation that leaders aspire to and inspire. Wherever possible, the community is engaged in shaping and reviewing services.
34. In the context of the pandemic, leaders have continued to make progress in improving the response to potential exploitation. Of note is the effective use of the pan-London 'red thread initiative' at local hospitals that reliably alerts professionals to potential violent crime. A multi-agency approach to intelligence-gathering and disruption, street-based youth work and an initiative to tackle violence against women and girls have all reaped positive results. The extension of the virtual school remit beyond children in care has also been a success.

35. Senior leaders are ably held to account by politicians, each other and the people they serve, in an environment that replicates the Camden model of practice, with relationships, trust and challenge at the heart of the organisation and a key tenet of practice.
36. Overall, the approach to sufficiency has equal focus on key pressure points, both keeping children at home and making sure that they are in the right place when they come into care. Given the recent and dramatic change in the demographics of the looked-after population, agile and sensitive responses to providing culturally appropriate accommodation for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children have resulted in quick moves into suitable accommodation. Young people's levels of independence are carefully matched with where they live, with high-quality emotional and legal support.
37. Corporate parenting is taken extremely seriously, with leaders at all levels ensuring that they listen directly to children and reach out to key businesses and services in the borough to achieve good routes into gainful education and employment. Similarly, leaders are fully involved in influencing other boroughs in London in terms of the offer to children in care and care leavers, and a more consistent response from the police.
38. The range of commissioned services and partnerships with external providers is impressive and used to full effect by practitioners, including mental health support, clinical supervision, support for victims of violence and much more.
39. The borough is actively involved in research conducted by universities nationally and locally. Feedback from complaints and learning from serious incidents are consolidated by appreciative enquiries into practice, which enhance the experience of children.
40. Performance information is accurate and used on a regular basis to shape systems and the deployment of staff. A thorough programme of quality assurance and auditing assures leaders that practice is of at least a good standard. One area for improvement has been clearly recognised, linking weaknesses identified in audits to individual supervision. Leaders have put in place an automatic feed through in the case recording system to remedy this.
41. Management oversight is regular, reflective and impactful across all areas of the service. Social workers report having a very positive experience of supervision. Although the written recording of supervision does not always capture the level of reflection provided during these sessions, leaders continually strive to find better ways to do so.
42. Caseloads are low, including for social workers in their assessed year, and this fully supports the model of practice, enabling workers to develop relationships with the tenacity needed to build trust. Caseloads are monitored effectively and additional capacity is added where needed.
43. Training in the systemic model of practice, thorough induction and additional input from both internal and external specialists prepare social workers well for the complex issues faced by families. The gradual return to face-to-face training

has been welcomed by the staff. In the interim, group supervision with input from systemic consultants has helped shape practice.

44. Senior leaders are highly visible and are reported as having been inspirational throughout the pandemic. Social workers feel very well supported and enjoy working in Camden. They describe being proud to work here. When social workers have personal issues that may affect their work, they feel that managers 'could not do any more' to support them. Consequently, social workers increasingly choose to work and remain here.

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