

# Inspection of Brent local authority children's services

**Inspection dates:** 20 to 24 February 2023

**Lead inspector:** Kendra Bell, His 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	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care	Good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Children in the London Borough of Brent benefit from good-quality help, support and care from children's services. They are helped by practitioners who are passionate and committed to improving children's lives and futures. Since the previous inspection in 2018 and a focused visit in 2019, services for children who need help and protection are much improved. However, the experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers have declined from outstanding and are now good.

Led by a new director of children's services, senior leaders know the strengths of children's services and the areas that need to improve. The consistent evaluation of the impact of services provides leaders with a mostly comprehensive understanding of service delivery and the progress made. Since the last inspection, leaders have increased their focus on help and protection services and they are now good. However, services for children in care and care leavers have declined from outstanding to good, due to reduced oversight in some areas of social work practice and challenges in recruitment and retention of staff. There is strong political support for children's services across the council. Investment to grow the workforce, restructure services and introduce new specialist teams is making a positive difference in improving children's lives. The recruitment and retention of staff and maintaining stable professional relationships for some children is an ongoing

challenge for senior leaders. As a result, a whole-workforce approach features prominently in improvement plans and in improving the experiences and progress of all children receiving services.

### **What needs to improve?**

- The compliance with private fostering regulations and the senior management oversight, performance management information and quality assurance of these arrangements.
- The attendance of children in care at their reviews and the quality of information provided to children following their reviews.
- Care leavers' understanding of and access to their health histories.
- The consistency of management supervision and recording.

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

1. The integrated Brent family 'front door' (BFFD) is effective in delivering the right response for children at the earliest time. Managers have worked effectively, and with additional resources, to respond to the sustained increase in the volume of contacts. A consultation line provides timely and helpful advice to professionals and a daily multi-agency individual risk management meeting reviews the latest information on highly vulnerable children. These inquisitive professional discussions lead to timely and proportionate actions that support children and keep them safer from harm. Managers and workers clearly identify risks to children, including harm from domestic abuse, neglect and extra-familial harm. Children are quickly referred by BFFD into children's statutory services for an immediate response when there are child protection concerns.
2. Workers gather a wide range of information about children and use this well to evaluate children's situations. Consent is well considered and decisions to override consent are taken appropriately by managers. Management oversight in BFFD is comprehensive and timely. Managers provide clear direction to workers and make informed decisions and recommendations for children. Managers escalate issues quickly if information from partners is delayed. As a result, most children receive the right response to their needs and recommendations for further support and services are appropriate.
3. Children's lives are improved by early help support. Brent's family well-being centres provide an extensive range of early help for children and families, including intensive targeted family support. Families have access to universal services and specialist help relating to poverty, domestic abuse and emotional health. Early help assessments draw on a wealth of family and professional information. They are detailed and analytical and lead to multi-agency family support plans that help to improve areas of concern. Plans are frequently reviewed and updated to reflect the progress children, and their families, make

in reaching their goals. When concerns increase for children, timely and relevant action is taken by early help managers to refer on to statutory services.

4. The emergency duty team responds appropriately to children's situations during evenings and at weekends. Managers hold timely discussions with police to ensure that steps can be taken for the immediate safety and protection of children. The support to children out of hours is strengthened by the work of the accelerated support team.
5. Most strategy discussions are swiftly arranged when there are potential risks of significant harm for children. Discussions are well attended by partners, with good information-sharing and the use of practice tools to help understand children's needs and risks. This leads to informed decision-making and timely action to help and protect children. A small number of strategy discussions are delayed due to police availability. When this happens, social work managers decide quickly if it is appropriate to wait for the strategy discussion or to respond immediately and visit children to ensure that they are safeguarded. Their decision, however, is made without full multi-agency information being available to ensure that there is a proportionate response for children. Subsequent child protection investigations are rightly focused on risk and lead to outcomes and actions that are suitable and protective for children. Professionals work with parents and extended family members at the earliest possible time to create safety plans to safeguard children.
6. Many social workers complete evaluative, thoughtful and strengths-based assessments of children's needs that inform child in need and child protection planning. They understand the impact of neglect and poverty and make good use of early help services to provide additional support to families. Many children's views are consistently captured during assessments through direct work by social workers. However, for a small number of children, assessments are of poorer quality. They are not sufficiently comprehensive and lack strong social work analysis. Management oversight does not consistently challenge poorer practice or clearly record the rationale for decision-making. Higher caseloads for some staff and staff turnover also affect the quality and timeliness of assessments for a small number of children. Senior leaders are aware of these issues and are taking suitable action to address them.
7. Disabled children receive high-quality support and services from well-trained workers. Children's needs are identified well by workers in assessments and result in detailed action plans that help them to make progress. Short-break packages of support are comprehensively monitored and reviewed on a regular basis with children, their family and professionals.
8. Social workers build supportive relationships with children and gain their trust. This helps children to talk openly with workers about their wishes and feelings, their needs, safety and well-being, and the progress they are making. Most

children on child in need and child protection plans receive timely and purposeful visits from social workers and their plans clearly identify risks and vulnerabilities. Actions are clear for families to understand what needs to change to protect their children and improve their lives.

9. Child protection conferences and core groups are mostly well attended and used well to review the impact of changes made by parents and the progress in reducing risk of harm. Parents are helped to improve the quality of their care and to make positive changes that increase safety for their children. These changes are tested over time to ensure improvements are sustained before stepping away from child protection planning. Decisive and timely action is taken by managers to move into the Public Law Outline process and to seek care if risks increase or remain too high for children. The letters sent to parents are clear about what needs to change to ensure that their children remain in their care. The process is used effectively to improve children's situations and divert children and families away from proceedings.
10. The specialist accelerated support team provides effective help for children on the edge of care to remain living with their families. Their work is making a positive difference in rebuilding and strengthening family relationships, and many children remain at home or are supported to return quickly. This includes support to children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless and those at risk of extra-familial harm.
11. Social workers and managers understand the nature and risk of extra-familial harm for children. They use a range of multi-agency professional meetings, practice tools and specialist risk assessments to explore and understand risk. Targeted multidisciplinary work with youth justice workers and police help to divert and protect many children from harm and keep them safer. Mentors are a valued support for children as trusted adults and play a key role in support and safety plans. When children go missing from home or care, they are consistently offered a return home interview (RHI), although not all are undertaken in a timely manner. RHIs are of good quality, identifying triggers, push/pull factors and locations and they are used well to inform safety plans.
12. The arrangements for a small number of children who are privately fostered do not meet regulation. While children are visited regularly and receive relevant support, the suitability of their care is not thoroughly assessed initially or subsequently reviewed to ensure that these arrangements remain appropriate for them.
13. Robust processes are in place to identify, monitor and review children who are missing education or are electively home educated, to ensure that they are adequately safeguarded.

14. The local authority designated officer is effective in managing allegations against professionals and carers. There is timely action, detailed recording and robust monitoring systems across all activity.

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

15. The decision for children to enter care is made appropriately. Many children in care live in safe and stable homes and receive good care which meets their needs, including complex health needs. They are supported to maintain important relationships with family and friends and enjoy a wide range of fun hobbies and activities that build self-esteem and confidence. Thorough assessments and informed actions support a small number of children to successfully return home to live with their parents.
16. Permanence planning is well considered for most children in care and gives them a sense of belonging and security in their home and care arrangements. A small but increasing number of children are experiencing moves which delay permanence being achieved for them. Senior managers have oversight of these children's arrangements and provide direction to workers on the action needed to prevent further moves.
17. The importance of life-story work is understood well by social workers and is mostly started early with children. However, it is not consistently brought together to form a narrative or completed in a timely way to ensure that children understand their childhoods and the reasons for them being in care.
18. Children's physical and emotional health needs are identified quickly when they come into care and are regularly reviewed. Children access a range of therapeutic services to support their emotional well-being and when waiting for specialist mental health support.
19. Many children in care make good educational progress and are supported well to attend school and to achieve. Personal education plans provide children with realistic and achievable targets and goals. Staff in the virtual school know their children in care very well and encourage them to learn and to have aspirations for their futures. When children need alternative provision, this is arranged quickly to keep them in education. No children in care are permanently excluded from school.
20. A very small number of children live in unregistered children's homes or settings which fall outside regulation. Senior and operational managers have regular oversight of these arrangements to ensure that children are appropriately safeguarded. Managers take timely and relevant action to seek alternative care, to regulate settings or to seek registered children's homes for children as soon as possible.

21. Children in care who go missing and those at risk of extra-familial harm are supported effectively by a range of services and timely interventions that reduce risks and help to keep them safer. This includes return home interviews, which are used well to inform safety plans.
22. Many children in care benefit from frequent and meaningful visiting and direct work from social workers who know them well. Additional funding enables social workers to spend more time with children doing fun activities. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive trauma-informed, sensitive and effective support from social workers, which is making a positive difference. They live in well-matched homes and are supported by a range of specialist services to help them settle into their new lives. However, not all children in care benefit from stability in their relationships with workers, due to staff changes.
23. Most children's care plans comprehensively identify their needs and are regularly reviewed to monitor their progress in all aspects of their development. Social workers and advocates regularly capture how children feel about being in care and what they think about the care they receive. Workers help to share this information for and with children at their review, to inform decision-making and plans. Children are helped to understand their rights and entitlements and how to make a complaint, and have access to independent visiting services. There is a waiting list for independent visitors, which delays this support for a very small number of children.
24. Most independent reviewing officers (IROs) monitor the progress of children's plans well between looked after reviews to ensure that actions are progressed. IROs write letters to children following their reviews. These letters are not consistently of good quality and a small number are not routinely shared with children, their carers or families. While many children are actively and purposefully helped to participate in their reviews, too many children do not directly attend. For these children, the decisions and plans made at the review are made for them and not with them.
25. A small number of children leave care and achieve timely permanence through special guardianship arrangements and adoption. There is good use of foster to adopt arrangements that enable children to live with their forever families at the earliest opportunity. Special guardians receive bespoke support, including financial support, to help them look after children and give them the permanence of a family away from the care system.
26. The fostering panel is diligent in its work to approve and review foster carers. Foster carers speak highly of the support they receive, including out of hours, and they are rightly proud of the progress their children make. There is a wide range of training on offer to carers and many foster carers have completed or are completing the training standards.

27. Adopters benefit from good-quality assessment and training through the regional adoption agency (Adopt London West). Children's plans for adoption are timely and supported by cohesive and effective partnerships that work well to achieve permanence for children through adoption. Good-quality life-story work and later-life letters are completed with all children placed for adoption.

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

28. Care leavers receive responsive and thoughtful help and support from their personal advisers (PAs). They are helped to make progress in their lives and maintain relationships, and many live successfully independently once they leave care. Care leavers have access to a variety of council and community-based services, including advocates, mentors and mental health workers. Planning for independence starts consistently for children in care when they are 16 and they are introduced to their PA at 17 years six months. They are invited to attend a 'getting to know you' session with the care leavers' teams to help them understand the range of support available to them as care leavers up to their 25th birthday.
29. Care leavers are encouraged and supported to help shape and develop care leaver services. The 'Brent care journey' partnership is focused on working with care leavers to co-design and improve care leavers' services as well as offering opportunities for social events. Care leavers routinely attend the corporate parenting board to share their experiences and influence service design.
30. PAs make every effort to ensure that care leavers know about the local offer, and most care leavers are well informed. The local offer is accessible and sets out the range of financial support and help available. This includes council tax relief and help towards transport costs, but not driving lessons. Not all elements of financial support, such as for Wi-Fi, are made explicit in the offer, so care leavers do not always understand what help can be asked for.
31. Care leavers contribute to their pathway plans, which contain their wishes, goals and aspirations. This places them firmly at the heart of decision-making and planning for their future. However, their identity is not covered thoroughly in plans and is not meaningfully described for them. Pathway plans identify current health needs, but care leavers do not routinely receive their health histories. Therefore, they are missing essential information and an understanding of their childhood health.
32. Many care leavers are in employment, education or training, including a large number at university. They have good support to help them with their studies, future careers and with employment aspirations. There are a range of opportunities to help care leavers return to employment, training or education. These include extra support before starting apprenticeships and specific courses to build confidence and skills. The virtual school and extended duty team continually search for apprenticeships and work collaboratively with businesses

and agencies to find opportunities for care leavers within the borough. They have worked well with several businesses and corporations to establish specific care leaver employment programmes and to guarantee job interviews for them. Support is available to care leavers with special educational and learning needs to ensure that reasonable adjustments are made in education, employment and training arrangements.

33. Many care leavers live in suitable and safe accommodation, including semi-independent living, independent living or with their former foster carers. They are provided with substantial advice, training and practical support to help them gain independent living skills. This includes going on accredited independence programmes, residential weekends, money courses and tenancy preparation. A monthly housing panel considers their readiness for independent living before this is agreed. This support enables care leavers to live in stable homes as young adults and provides them with a sense of security for their future. There have been no tenancy breakdowns for several years.
34. Care leavers who are parents are well supported. A recent parenting programme was extremely beneficial in reducing feelings of isolation and helping care leavers to feel more confident as young parents.
35. Care leavers are helped to stay safe and many are safe. PAs understand the risks to them and their vulnerabilities. When there are risks of extra-familial harm, PAs provide intensive support and take proactive steps to help reduce risks. This helps them to live more safely in the community.
36. Care leavers in custody are mostly well supported and have up-to-date pathway plans. They are visited regularly and helped by PAs and prison staff to feel safe. However, with a small number of care leavers, PAs adopt more of a befriending and support role and do not always sufficiently advocate for them following serious incidents in prison.

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

37. There is strong political support for improving services and making positive differences to the lives of children and to their futures. The borough plan is informed by children and members of the community and focuses on what matters most to them. The need for services is increasing and more children and families are needing help and support to manage the impact of growing unemployment levels, adversity and hardship.
38. Robust governance arrangements provide members and senior leaders with a clear line of sight of children's services. There is relevant scrutiny by council members of the impact of services for children. Effective performance management information provides the lead member, chief officer and senior leaders with a comprehensive overview of most aspects of children's services'



delivery, practice and performance. Senior leaders use this information well to identify the strengths of children's services and the areas to improve. However, the systems in place have not identified effectively the shortfalls in practice for children who are privately fostered or in areas of practice for children in care and care leavers that have declined.

39. Senior leaders have well-established and respectful relationships with partners, the judiciary and schools. The strategic and partnership response to protecting children at risk of extra-familial harm is effective and extensive, and the family court judge commented positively on the quality of children's services' practice in the court arena. These relationships provide a solid foundation for effective and purposeful collaborative working across a range of high-functioning strategic boards and programmes. However, while partnership working is strong and senior leaders have regularly escalated the issue, they have not been able to resolve police delays in arranging a small but significant number of child protection strategy discussions.
40. There is a hands-on approach by senior leaders and managers in improving practice and achieving positive change for children in their lives. A range of multi-agency operational panels review practice efficiently and oversee progress for children. However, during the inspection, senior leaders were made aware of the shortfalls in practice, quality assurance and senior management oversight of children who are privately fostered. The numbers of children privately fostered is very low and this suggests children are not being identified. Immediate steps were taken by senior leaders to address these issues during the inspection.
41. Members of the council and senior leaders are listening, committed and caring corporate parents. Members of the vibrant child in care and care leavers' councils, called 'Care in Action' and 'Care Leavers in Action', attend the corporate parenting board and are actively involved in initiatives and innovative projects that help to improve and strengthen services and support. Co-design with children and care leavers is at the heart of the approach to children's services improvement. Managers are working on plans to increase participation activity and the numbers of children and care leavers who attend these groups.
42. The investment in a highly skilled edge of care team is successfully helping to keep many children at home with their families. The use of foster carers, family and friends carers, independent fostering arrangements and externally commissioned supported accommodation is providing most children with suitable care. However, these homes are not all local, and many children move to neighbouring areas when they come into care. Increasing the number of local foster carers and opening a new children's home is a key focus for senior leaders in providing more local care for children. There is extensive senior management oversight and quality assurance of the arrangements for a very small number of children living in unregistered settings and others which fall outside regulation.

43. A comprehensive framework of regular quality assurance activity places importance on listening to children, families and staff to help shape learning. This is used well to provide the whole workforce with insight into the quality of practice and where practice needs to improve. However, not all audits involve workers and feedback from children and families is not routinely sought. Not all workers benefit from supervision discussions with managers that support them to learn from audits and to make improvements in their work.
44. Senior leaders are acutely aware of and responsive to persistent workforce pressures which are impacting on children and staff. The turnover of staff continues to impact on a small number of children, in their relationships with workers and in the progress of their plans. Higher caseloads for a number of staff are affecting the quality of their practice and the help they provide to children. Senior leaders are taking action to recruit and retain staff, and to stabilise the workforce. Additional staffing, a new recruitment campaign and an enhanced employment and comprehensive workplace offer are in place, and senior leaders are taking measures to strengthen management oversight in several teams. However, senior leaders are not sufficiently sighted or assured of the mitigations in place that help to reduce impact for those children who are most affected by changes of worker.
45. Workers benefit from comprehensive and up-to-date operational policies that promote good practice. They have access to a regular programme of learning and training and opportunities to develop themselves in their careers. Succession planning is used well to retain and progress workers within the organisation. Staff emulate the core values of children's services and feel they 'belong' in Brent. They value the very considered approach and openness of senior leaders and have confidence in their leadership. Many staff are committed to working in Brent and enjoy working in teams who become like a family to them. They have a strong and influential voice and feel listened to in service design and improvement work. They feel well supported and supervised by managers. However, the frequency and quality of supervision is not consistent for all workers. Senior leaders are aware of this, and management supervision is a key aspect of the improvement plan for children's services.

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Piccadilly Gate  
Store Street  
Manchester  
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231  
Textphone: 0161 618 8524  
E: [enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)  
W: [www.gov.uk/ofsted](http://www.gov.uk/ofsted)

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