

Inspection of Hillingdon local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 2 to 6 October 2023

Lead inspector: Christine Kennet, His 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	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding

Children in the London Borough of Hillingdon continue to receive highly effective services. Very strong political support and diligent partnerships have enabled the senior leadership team to be an excellent champion for children, families and young people. Since the last inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) in 2018, leaders have continued to strengthen and improve practice, despite the increasing demands on services. An ongoing 'transformation' of services has improved frontline practice with children and families. There are areas of innovation that stand out as exceptional practice, improving children's experiences and progress, such as the enhanced offer to children and families out of hours.

Children are protected by cogent partnerships, augmented by a chief executive, previously the director of children's services, who has strengthened seamless relationships with partners, and a stable and experienced senior leadership team. Children and families benefit from relationship-based practice and the recently created Stronger Families Hub, which is making a positive difference to their lives. Social workers, who are curious, skilled and experienced, deliver comprehensive assessments and interventions, helping to improve children's lives.

When children come into care, they receive highly personalised care, enabling them to make substantive progress. Care leavers can choose their personal advisers (PAs), helping them create positive relationships with workers and enhancing their sense of co-designing services. Children who are vulnerable to exploitation benefit from a comprehensive array of services that carefully identify, map and track risks, with timely bespoke interventions to keep children safe.

What needs to improve?

- Services for 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless.
- Keeping in touch with care leavers and ensuring that their rights and entitlements are communicated effectively.

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

1. Children and families benefit from impressive family help services, which have improved since the last ILACS inspection. Three locality-based teams provide a range of multi-agency services within defined geographical areas, with the intention of early identification of need and wraparound support to prevent the need for increased levels of intervention. One of six planned multi-agency family hubs is operational and providing a range of co-located services, including family time, youth justice, multi-agency psychological support and children's centre services. Children and families receive prompt interventions from skilled and experienced early help staff, who intervene to alleviate parenting pressures, supporting children and families to have the right help at the right time.
2. Good-quality early help assessments are formulated alongside families. Practitioners understand when parental consent is required or can be dispensed with and write plans that are clear and easy for families to understand, with children's views clearly articulated. Plans are measured against a time frame of appropriate intervention and decision-making. Management oversight is a strength and designated pathways for stepping children's cases up and stepping down between the Stronger Families Hub and social work services take place effectively, so that children receive the help they need.
3. Hillingdon has launched a Stronger Families programme underpinned by a single pathway into the Stronger Families Hub and multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), which operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Experienced MASH triage workers gather initial information and are skilled at identifying safeguarding concerns, ensuring that levels of need between early help and social work services are well understood. The model allows practitioners to have the required time to make informed decisions. Managers in the MASH provide a timely response to safeguarding concerns, and they signpost children and families to the relevant service to meet their level of need.

4. Experienced and confident MASH workers evaluate information about children quickly and competently. Practitioners are alert to the possibility of exploitation and are curious about seemingly isolated incidents. Practitioners are proactive in seeking support from an innovative multi-agency specialist resource. Comprehensive analysis of factual and other relevant information helps target interventions to children at risk of exploitation, of being involved in serious youth violence or of being missing. Children and families receive timely child-focused interventions to divert and disrupt exploitation, in partnership with the police and youth justice services.
5. When children's needs increase or there are concerns about their safety, strategy meetings are held promptly and involve multi-agency professionals who are co-located in the MASH alongside workers in the first response teams. Work transfers quickly to the first response teams when appropriate, with clear management oversight setting out actions for next steps to safeguard children.
6. Assessments of children's needs are a strength. They are detailed, thorough and demonstrate professional curiosity, carefully considering relevant historical information. The impact of parental behaviours on parenting capacity is also carefully considered and sensitively explored. Social workers use a strengths-based model of practice and see assessment as an intervention. They routinely involve fathers in assessments and plans, which consider children's individual and diverse needs. Domestic abuse is mostly appropriately recognised and responded to, with a focus on all children in the family. Families are linked into support services to enhance their understanding of the impact of domestic abuse, facilitating changes in parental behaviours. This helps to ensure that children are safeguarded. For a very small number of children, detailed information that assists in understanding the severity, frequency and impact of domestic abuse is not fully explored to understand the lived experiences of the child.
7. Hillingdon has experienced a rise in demand for services since its last inspection, as a result of the impact of increases in the cost of living. The senior leadership team has responded well to these additional pressures by targeting extra support through the implementation of the Stronger Families multi-agency locality-based practice hubs, and smaller specialist hubs offering housing and immigration support.
8. Children are seen regularly by their social workers and their views are actively sought through purposeful direct work, which includes creative examples of interaction, observation and play to build positive relationships. Child-in-need and child-protection plans are comprehensive and clearly provide for contingency planning. Plans are regularly reviewed through well-attended core groups and child-in-need review meetings, resulting in children's plans being progressed to improve their circumstances. A small number of children live in

neglectful circumstances for too long without decisive intervention to improve their well-being.

9. Child-protection conferences are timely, well chaired and result in appropriate plans to safeguard children. Social work reports are detailed and succinct, with a focused analysis of children's current circumstances. The quality of child-in-need and child-protection plans is consistently good, with evidence of comprehensive support being provided for both parents and children. This leads to positive impacts on children's welfare and consequent reduction in risks.
10. Edge-of-care services for vulnerable adolescents and those at risk of exploitation are offered through the innovative adolescent service. The service works with children in need as well as children who have become looked after. Skilled, experienced and enthusiastic workers offer regular, or even daily, visits if needed, to help create trust and develop positive relationships through careful and sensitive work. Children are supported where feasible to choose their own social worker, empowering them and enhancing the possibility of building trusting relationships. Social workers in the adolescent service have devolved budgets to enable them to make individual decisions on plans to support children and families and this sits alongside a pilot programme that utilises cognitive behavioural therapy principles as part of the work.
11. Focused collaborative multi-agency working, combined with comprehensive vulnerability risk assessments, helps keep children at risk of exploitation safe. Emerging risks are well identified and carefully considered safety-planning helps reduce risks for these children.
12. Work with disabled children is delivered by thoughtful, compassionate social workers who are knowledgeable and understand the impact of children's disabilities and complex health needs. On occasions, children are seen by duty workers when their social workers are not available, which means a small number of children do not experience consistent relationships with trusted adults who know them well. The senior leadership team is aware of the capacity issues within this part of the service and is establishing an additional team to reduce workloads and enable workers to spend more time with children.
13. When children's experiences are not improving, there is appropriate escalation via the Hillingdon access to resources panel to consider further interventions necessary to safeguard children. Effective management oversight of children subject to the pre-proceedings phase of the Public Law Outline ensures that children remain subject to these interventions only when necessary.
14. The arrangements for 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless or at risk of homelessness are not well understood or implemented. While support for them is prompt, with children and family assessments completed, the assessments of homelessness do not sufficiently explore all risks and needs.

This means some children's vulnerabilities are not sufficiently alleviated, and they are not always aware of their rights, entitlements or housing options.

15. The local authority has effective systems in place to satisfy itself that vulnerable home-educated children are safeguarded. Staff in the 'children with a social worker' education team provide valuable support, advice and guidance to other professionals when there are any education-related issues for children in need and those with a child-protection plan.
16. Senior leaders have established a highly responsive provision for families who need out-of-hours services with the establishment of an all-hours specialised service to children and families. This enables a proportionate and timely service to be delivered to children and families when operational daytime services are closed.

The experiences and progress of children in care: outstanding

17. Children in care receive an outstanding level of help and support. Hillingdon is highly committed to supporting children to remain at home with their families or within their family and friends' network when it is safe to do so. Consequently, children only come into care when it is necessary. When children can no longer remain living in the care of their parents or carers, family group conferences are used to help to identify potential kinship carers in children's extended family or support networks. Decisions for children to come into care are appropriate and are informed by good-quality assessments, helping to keep them safe. Permanence is timely, securing stability and reducing delay. This is overseen by highly productive panels and permanence planning meetings to secure timely decision-making.
18. Social workers have caseloads that enable them to spend time with children, building trusting relationships. Social workers are skilled, experienced and ambitious for children, who they know well and visit regularly, in line with their needs. Social workers are committed to children and are proud of their roles in their lives, talking with warmth and knowledge about them and ensuring that their needs are known and met effectively. Highly skilled practitioners are creative in the direct work they do with children, which helps children understand their journeys into and through care. Creative direct work explores their wishes and views, which is evident in care-planning. Life-story work is a real strength, particularly for children who have a care plan for adoption. Social workers undertake very detailed work, and they understand the value of these records for children in retaining their histories and understanding of their identities.
19. Collaborative work, often undertaken by the out-of-hours service, assesses risk and needs for children who become looked after in an emergency. Assessment and planning are timely, particularly for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children or those where intelligence suggests they may have been trafficked

through Heathrow airport. These children are well supported to access safe and appropriate accommodation, and legal and responsive emotional support, recognising their religious and cultural needs. Social workers understand that these children have often had traumatic experiences in their country of origin or during their journey to seek asylum.

20. Children have access to mental health support via an in-house multi-agency psychological support (MAPS) service and skilled social workers support their referral to counselling services or to emotional health provision when needed. Foster carers are helpfully supported via the MAPS service to understand children's complex needs and behaviours, which helps to prevent placement breakdown. Strengths and difficulties questionnaires are routinely completed to ensure that children's emotional and mental health needs are known and understood. Children's health needs are reviewed at regular intervals and initial health assessments are completed in a timely way, ensuring that their health needs are identified and met.
21. Disabled children benefit from skilled social workers who take the time to know them well and to understand their disabilities and complex health needs. When undertaking visits to children, social workers carefully consider their communication needs to help ensure that their views are known. There are some delays in the progression of a small number of these children's care plans, due to different health authority funding and boundaries. Senior leaders are aware of these issues and are progressing plans for change.
22. Care plans are a real strength and comprehensively address children's needs and experiences. Plans are individual and are informed by assessments of children's unique and diverse needs. Children benefit from regular looked after reviews, which they contribute to, attend or co-chair. Partner attendance at reviews is good and identified actions are effective in progressing plans. Independent reviewing officers routinely visit or speak to children between and before reviews so that their wishes and feelings shape their care plans and there is vigorous independent oversight. Very detailed, thoughtfully written records of plans and reviews help children understand how and why decisions were made for them.
23. Children in care who are at high risk of exploitation are promptly assessed and bespoke plans are put in place to help make them safe. When children present significant vulnerability and risk factors, including lengthy episodes of being missing and suspected gang involvement, there is appropriate use of statutory powers to intervene and specialist assessments. This includes securing additional specialist support to make children safer and to mitigate risks. When children go missing, appropriate determined measures are followed, including regular strategy meetings, child-exploitation risk assessments and multi-agency meetings and reviews.

24. Children in Hillingdon participate in a range of successful Children in Care Council and care leavers' groups, which meet regularly. These are valuable groups, where children and young people can gain support from one another and share their views with senior leaders and elected members. Children's views are clearly heard and incorporated into future thinking about service delivery. When children do not feel happy about decisions made for them, they are offered advocacy to enable them to articulate their wishes and feelings and for representation to ensure that these views are heard.
25. The virtual school is very well led. The committed and stable team shares the high aspirations of Hillingdon's leaders and managers, and the school's designated teachers value their work greatly. The service places personal education plans (PEPs) at the core of its work and sees them as the key means of tracking the child's journey and supporting their progress. All PEPs are completed within designated timescales and the quality of PEPs is of a very good standard, focusing on achievement, progress, attendance and enrichment. The team has an accurate view of what is working well and where it needs to sharpen and target its focus. Education outcomes were not as high this year as in the previous year, and the team is rightly focusing on improving outcomes, raising attendance levels, including for post-16 students, and reducing the number of suspensions from school. The team is successful in supporting young people to take up education, employment and training, though retention remains a challenge for some. The service provides a high-quality range of training and professional development internally and for providers. Children benefit from a plentiful variety of enrichment and personal development opportunities.
26. There are a very small number of children in unregistered children's homes and unapproved kinship placements. There is a robust process to monitor these arrangements, particularly regarding the unregistered children's homes. Children in such placements are all seen regularly by social workers and have effective oversight, monitoring and scrutiny by senior managers.
27. Permanence options are carefully considered for children, and most are placed in stable foster homes where they say they feel safe. Long-term matches are progressed to secure permanence and stability for children, allowing them to form secure attachments. Children's progression into permanence is tracked and progressed. Good use is made of family group conferences, supporting children to live with connected carers and special guardians where this is appropriate.
28. Plans to recruit additional foster carers in Hillingdon are in their infancy. Tangible plans have been identified but are not yet in place to help increase the numbers of foster carers to meet the diverse needs of the borough's children. Children who live with foster carers are looked after by well-supported carers who are equipped with the skills they need, including specialist care for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. However, kinship carers, who make

up a significant number of foster carers, lack specific training that helps them explore the unique nature of caring for extended family members.

29. Adoption, including early permanence options, is a particular strength. The relationship between the regional adoption agency (Ambitious for Adoption) and the borough results in effective early permanence planning, including fostering for adoption and support for children to be adopted with their brothers and sisters. Collaborative-working results in seamless transitions for children between foster carers and their adoptive family. Support for adopters throughout, and beyond, this transition is clearly identified and provided in a timely way.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

30. Care leavers in Hillingdon receive a good service, which continues to be available to them until they are 25. Committed PAs make a real difference to care leavers' lives. Young people are positive about the support their PAs provide and told inspectors that advisers respond quickly to their needs.
31. Care leavers are allocated to their PAs at 16 years, which helps the building of positive and trusting relationships before they transfer to the leaving-care service. There is, however, some variability in the frequency of contact, meaning that, for a minority of young people, there is inconsistency in the service they receive.
32. Most pathway plans are detailed, comprehensive and sensitively written and carefully consider all aspects of care leavers' needs, with impressively detailed contingency plans. Plans are created with care leavers, resulting in more relevant actions to improve their well-being. There is a clear focus on how care leavers will be supported with their aspirations and goals. In a small number of cases, pathway plans are not updated when care leavers' circumstances change or needs escalate.
33. PAs are genuinely interested in care leavers' well-being. Their visits are at a frequency consistent with levels of need and are mostly well recorded, providing evidence of compassionate, focused conversations. Young people are helped to develop supportive networks and to develop into independent adults.
34. PAs are knowledgeable about care leavers' health needs, with a thorough consideration of these captured for them in their pathway plans. Health needs are well articulated in these plans. However, not all care leavers have received copies of their health histories.
35. The importance of care leavers engaging in education, employment or training is fully understood by their PAs, who work hard to expand the opportunities available for them.

36. When there are concerns about the safety of care leavers, their vulnerability is recognised and appropriate safety plans are promptly put in place. This help reflects and mitigates the risks that they face.
37. Care leavers who are parents are supported by PAs who build strong relationships with them and their children. Effective joint-working between PAs and universal services, such as family centres, is helping to ensure that care leavers' individual needs are being met at the same time as them being supported to develop the skills to become successful parents.
38. The local authority is in contact with the majority of care leavers. When contact is lost with care leavers, there is limited evidence, in some cases, of proactive attempts to remain in contact or ascertain their well-being.
39. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers are well supported by their PAs, who visit them in accordance with their needs. PAs keep plans up to date and provide timely, tangible support. They consider the impact of young people's journeys into the UK and associated trauma, and their unique characteristics and needs, when formulating plans.
40. Care leavers in custody receive good support. PAs continue to visit and offer encouragement, advocacy and financial and emotional support. There is good forward planning to ensure that needs, including housing needs, are identified in advance of release dates.
41. Care leavers are provided with their important documents, such as their birth certificate, passport and national insurance number. The local offer, though clearly accessible to care leavers, is not clear enough about what they are entitled to. This means that some care leavers are not fully informed of these entitlements.
42. Care leavers' participation is a real strength. Care leavers speak passionately about how their voices influence decision-making and change. It was positive to hear young people tell inspectors that they had joined participation groups to give back to the council, which they feel has done so much for them. Recently, some young people are being offered a choice of who will be their PA, enhancing young people's feeling of being listened to.
43. Most care leavers live in suitable accommodation that meets their needs, with several housing pathways available. An increase in young people with more specialist needs leaving care in Hillingdon limits the choice of provision for these young people. This gap is fully recognised by leaders, with relevant plans in place, but it is too early to evidence the impact of these on sufficiency of accommodation provision. Care leavers move into independent accommodation when they are assessed as having the necessary life skills to successfully navigate such a change.

44. Care-experienced young people aged 21 plus continue to receive relevant support that is responsive to their needs.

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

45. Starting from an already impressive service, senior leaders have remained determined and ambitious for their children and have continued to strengthen and improve services for the benefit of children and families. Children and families are prioritised and benefit from the aspirational and proactive senior leadership team and political leaders in the borough who bring a strong track record of continuous improvement. Inspectors found most children receiving good, and for some children outstanding, care and protection that is making a positive difference to their lives. The Stronger Families Hub, children in care service, adolescent team and adoption work stand out as areas of strong and innovative practice that result in some excellent outcomes for children. Senior leaders know themselves well and understand their strengths and the areas that need improving and have strong improvement plans in place.
46. The chief executive, lead member and senior leadership team are strong champions for children and engage well with the wider council in its corporate parenting responsibilities. The lead member has been proactive in seeking the views of children and foster carers. She has strongly supported the powerful training led and presented by care leavers to help improve leaders' understanding of care leavers' experiences. The chief executive has built on the previously strong partnership networks within and beyond the borough. His knowledge and experience, alongside close allegiance with partners, have allowed close working with others at a strategic level for the benefit of children and families.
47. The senior leadership team is open and responsive to feedback, wanting to get things right for children. It is highly reflective and aspirational and has continued to improve and develop services for children in a manner that inspires confidence, and that staff can and do relate to.
48. Partnership work is a strength within Hillingdon, with a relentless focus on cooperation with partners, families and communities. Through relationship-based work and the creation of the Stronger Families Hub, families and communities are well supported to address issues before they require more intense interventions.
49. Determined leaders have continued to improve services, working closely with partners and listening to the voices of the different communities in Hillingdon. This is driving continuous and innovative transformation, with ongoing insightful reviews of services to achieve the best outcomes for children. This includes the adolescent team, which undertakes bespoke and comprehensive multi-agency interventions with children.

50. Leaders have a strong knowledge of what is needed to improve services for children. There is an established and comprehensive quality assurance framework in place, with detailed quarterly reports, supporting learning from a range of audit activity and direct feedback from children and parents. This is well established and gives a very detailed oversight of practice.
51. There is stability in the senior leadership team and staff experience leaders as approachable and available. Staff spoke to inspectors in an overwhelmingly positive way about the support they receive from managers. Management oversight and supervision of practice are real strengths.
52. Hillingdon has experienced stability in its workforce over a period of time but is not alone in struggling in the recruitment of social work staff. Leaders' approach has been focused on staff well-being, training and career progression to develop, retain and attract staff, as well as having sound recruitment and retention plans in place. Social workers receive good-quality, consistent supervision, training and support. Workers talked consistently about their loyalty and commitment to the service. Overall, caseloads are at a level that allows social workers to undertake relationship-based social work with children and families consistent with their assessed needs and plans.
53. Leaders are providing a learning environment, linking with local universities to offer the Practice Educator programme to develop workers' skills and knowledge. Hillingdon supports a number of social work students, who complete their training in the borough and often choose to stay. Hillingdon also runs an ambitious programme for social work apprenticeships, with the first cohort completing and stepping into their assessed and supported year in employment with the council.



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