

# Inspection of Hounslow local authority children's services

**Inspection dates:** 16 to 20 October 2023

**Lead inspector:** Nick Bennison, His Majesty's Inspector

<b>Judgement</b>	<b>Grade</b>
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	Good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Significant progress since the last inspection in 2018 has enabled the overall experiences of children to now be consistently good. Clear strategic direction, strong partnerships and good political and corporate support for children's services have improved the conditions for frontline social work practice. The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection and children in care have markedly improved since 2018. Leaders have identified very effective support for children, despite increasing demand following the COVID-19 pandemic and a significant increase in the numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. The local authority has invested in services and implemented a coherent strategy to help children at the earliest opportunity, reducing the need for more intensive support.

Senior leaders have developed a strong, child-focused culture that is evident throughout the organisation. They have been relentless in understanding their strengths and areas for development and then improving the impact of services on the experiences and progress of children and families. They have acted quickly when services have needed further development, creating an agile service that is responsive to vulnerable children's changing needs.

## What needs to improve?

- Promotion of the rights and entitlements for care leavers over the age of 21.
- The allocation of personal advisers early enough to enable children in care to form trusting relationships before they reach their 18th birthday.
- The completion of timely life-story work and later-life letters for adopted children.
- The timely assessments of children requiring early help.

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

1. Children and families benefit from effective family help services, which have improved since the last inspection. Early help assessments and plans are comprehensive, reflecting children's wishes and experiences well. For some children, the assessments take too long to complete, resulting in a delay in understanding the wide-ranging needs of families. When concerns escalate or needs increase, there is appropriate step-up from early help to social care.
2. Multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) thresholds are applied effectively. Children's needs are identified and responded to in a timely manner, with proactive management oversight of decision-making. Partnership working in the MASH is effective. MASH specialist workers help families to access the right support quickly. Parental consent is carefully considered, recorded and appropriately overridden when required, with clear management oversight.
3. The emergency duty service responds appropriately to children's needs out of hours, with a timely transfer of information to daytime services.
4. Strategy meetings are timely and well attended, with most resulting in actions appropriate to protect children. When children are at risk of significant harm, social workers respond quickly. Child protection assessments are thorough and informed by children's views, with timely progression to initial child protection conferences where appropriate.
5. Assessments are well considered and culturally sensitive, with analysis of children's lived experiences as well as parents' own histories and families' support needs. Families do not have to wait for assessments to be completed before they receive some relevant support.
6. Social workers visit children regularly and know them very well. Focused direct work helps them to understand children's worlds, and helps the children to have insight into their own circumstances.
7. Child protection and child in need plans are effective in helping to improve children's circumstances. Plans are comprehensive and clear and measure progress; most are reviewed in a timely manner. When risks escalate, social

workers take appropriate action to reduce the level of risk. Plans explicitly consider contingencies and potential care options for children within the family network.

8. Edge of care workers in the specialist intervention support programme provide intensive support to enable children to remain at home when it is safe to do so. Psychological assessments, psychotherapy practitioners and parenting practitioners carry out focused assessments and intensive direct work which are helping to improve the experiences and progress of children and families.
9. Emerging risks to most children who are vulnerable to exploitation are identified early by the skilled and knowledgeable social workers in the adolescent teams. Workers build positive relationships with children and provide a range of focused interventions designed to minimise risk. The co-location of the missing and exploitation coordinator with social workers enables highly effective collaboration and timely information-sharing. Workers are persistent in pursuing return home interviews and sharing intelligence with police and other agencies. Effective work across the partnership in peer mapping is identifying and targeting adults and locations where children are at risk in their communities.
10. The impact of domestic abuse on children is well recognised and articulated clearly in assessments. The impact on children is understood. However, the severity of incidents in informing the level of risk to victims is not always explicit and language relating to victims of abuse is sometimes blaming.
11. Most children are subject to effective child protection plans which result in timely change. There is a strong response to neglect, reducing drift and delay for children. For the minority of children who are subject to child protection plans for a longer period, there is effective management oversight of risk, and timely consideration of the pre-proceedings phase of the Public Law Outline. Letters before proceedings are written clearly, with careful use of language to explain the concerns that professionals have about the care of children. Comprehensive and effective trackers and panels enable exceptionally strong oversight of children in pre-proceedings and those in care proceedings. Senior leaders track children who are diverted from pre-proceedings, with most experiencing positive outcomes.
12. Disabled children's experiences are well understood by workers and they benefit from frequent visits in line with their needs. Bespoke packages of care, including residential short breaks, community play schemes and direct payments, widen children's social spheres and help to develop their independence skills. Children access advocacy services when appropriate and their wishes and feelings are captured in thorough and sensitively written records. Plans are regularly reviewed to ensure that children are making progress.

13. Arrangements for 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless are effective. They have their needs carefully assessed by caring staff. Where appropriate, children are very well supported to return home with tailored support under a child in need plan, or to move to other types of provision. When children cannot return home, they are provided with appropriate accommodation and support, including coming into care, and they are given full information about their rights and entitlements.
14. The local authority has worked diligently across teams and services to identify and raise awareness about privately fostered children, but recognise that they have more to do. Privately fostered children's needs are mostly assessed promptly. They are visited regularly and seen alone and their views are clearly recorded.
15. The response to allegations against adults or volunteers who are working in a position of trust with children is proportionate and timely. Additional local authority designated officer capacity and a clearly written joint protocol are continuing to support the ongoing work with Feltham Young Offender Institution. Assiduous work by the designated officer is raising awareness and building trust across services and consequently there is an increase in referrals to the service.
16. The local authority provides effective oversight of children missing education (CME) and those in receipt of elective home education (EHE). The CME officer works well with other agencies to establish children's whereabouts, with a strong and effective focus on safeguarding vulnerable children. Leaders have increased the size and expertise of the EHE team in response to a growth in the number of children who are educated at home. The team has up-to-date knowledge of vulnerable children and young people and works well with partner agencies.

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

17. Decisions for children to come into care are appropriate, timely and in line with their needs. For most children, this takes place in a planned way, based on comprehensive and detailed assessments.
18. When children can no longer continue living safely in the care of their parents or carers, assessments help to identify potential kinship carers in children's extended family or support networks. When children in care return to live with their parents, this is on the basis of carefully considered assessments, with consistent senior manager oversight. Assessments include a clear analysis of potential risks and protective factors, with increased visiting helping to ensure children's safety.
19. Most children live in good-quality homes that meet their individual needs. Most children are matched well with their carers and live with their brothers and

sisters when this is in their best interests. Children are actively encouraged and helped to maintain meaningful contact with people who are important to them. They experience a wide range of activities and opportunities that enable them to enjoy life and to make good progress.

20. Care plans are comprehensive and accurately reflect children's needs. They set out clear goals in order to support children's development and achievements. Most plans are updated swiftly to reflect changes in children's lives or decisions made at their reviews. Plans for children in care are aspirational and aim high.
21. Permanence planning, including pre-birth planning, is effective and timely, securing stability for children. Clear oversight by decision-making panels and independent reviewing officers (IROs) ensures that children benefit from diligent arrangements to secure permanence at the earliest opportunity.
22. Children in care are visited frequently, alone and in line with their needs. Social workers spend time with children, building trusting relationships. Social workers are skilled and committed to children and undertake creative direct work. The direct work is used to carefully explore children's wishes and feelings, and these are evident in care planning. Life-story work is carried out with children in long-term foster care to help them to understand past trauma and make sense of their history. Children are assisted to understand their rights and entitlements and are routinely offered access to advocacy services.
23. Social workers are ambitious in their aspirations for children. Achievements are recognised and rewarded through an annual celebration, with a voucher and certificate which are well received by children in care. Children and young people are well represented at both the Children in Care and Care Leavers Forum. They feel heard by senior leaders and councillors, and co-chair the corporate parenting board where they consider themselves able to effect change and advocate for others.
24. Practice for disabled children in care has been strengthened and they now live in homes that meet their health and social care needs. They are visited regularly in accordance with their needs. Social workers carry out focused direct work, using a range of communication methods to understand their wishes and to inform decisions about their care.
25. Children's individual cultures and diverse needs are well considered and prioritised. Social workers demonstrate genuine curiosity about how children's religion and culture are experienced and impact on their care. They help children to be safe and provide support around internet safety and exploitation. When children go missing, appropriate measures are followed, such as regular strategy meetings, completing child exploitation risk assessments and holding multi-agency meetings and reviews.

26. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children's needs and their journeys to the UK are well understood by social workers. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children live in safe, suitable accommodation that is reflective of their needs and wishes. The children attend college to study English for Speakers of Other Languages and other relevant courses to help them adjust to life in the UK, to increase opportunities and to become part of their communities. Sensitive and planned work is undertaken with the therapeutic practitioner, to support children's emotional health and well-being. Additional specialist support is commissioned when needed to help children who have experienced sexual abuse.
27. Children's emotional needs are well supported, with therapeutic oversight provided by the therapeutic practitioner in the through care team mitigating delays in receiving support from child and adolescent mental health services. The importance of children's health needs is well recognised by social workers and carers. Timely initial and review health assessments monitor children's overall health and children attend routine dental and optician appointments.
28. Children's plans are reviewed regularly, and their voice can be seen in the records of their reviews. Children are empowered to create their own agendas and chair their own reviews. IRO oversight is clearly evident in their records. Review decisions are clearly recorded, helping children to understand decisions. Meetings with social workers between reviews help to ensure timely progression of children's plans.
29. Children are well supported in education, with active monitoring of their attainment, attendance and progress. Personal education plans identify social, emotional and academic needs well. Targets are set and reviewed in a timely manner. Additional tuition and mentoring support are provided to help children to succeed. Leaders are aware that a small number of vulnerable children with complex needs who live outside the borough are not in education and have plans in place to ensure such children can access appropriate provision.
30. The virtual college provides targeted support for children and young people in care. The staff know the children and young people well and provide effective oversight of their progress. Individual tuition for children in care supports children well in developing their English and mathematics skills. In addition, children receive effective support for their wider personal development to pursue their interests and talents.
31. Staff at the virtual college undertake effective direct work with children and young people; specific mentors are placed in three schools in the borough where there are high numbers of children in care. Schools value the additional support for their vulnerable pupils. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive good support from a member of the virtual college when they attend college.

32. The fostering panel is effective and has a diverse range of members who carefully consider children's needs. A wide range of training is provided, including bespoke training to meet individual carers' needs. Foster carers are well supported by their social workers and managers, receiving regular visits, training and supervision.
33. Arrangements with the regional adoption agency, Adopt London West, are effective. Adoption practice in Hounslow is undertaken diligently, including consideration and use of early permanence. This is embedded across the teams in social work practice, and allows for early consideration of permanence, with timely planning to ensure that children move to their permanent home as soon as possible.
34. Children placed for adoption are well supported. They receive services promptly to support their transition to their new families. However, for some children, life-story work and later-in-life letters are not consistently timely.

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

35. Care leavers receive a good service. They benefit from strong, positive relationships with their personal advisers (PAs). They are visited regularly, and their PAs offer them comprehensive practical and emotional support, acting as enthusiastic advocates for them. This ensures that care leavers' needs are well understood and supported as they navigate independent living.
36. Some care leavers are not allocated a PA until their 18th birthday. This means that they are not able to build an effective relationship prior to this significant transition.
37. Pathway plans are co-produced with care leavers, resulting in relevant actions to improve their well-being. Plans clearly detail the care leavers' needs and identify the time-bound interventions needed to ensure that these needs are met. There is a clear focus on how care leavers will be supported with their aspirations and goals. PAs clearly identify care leavers' cultural diversity and identity needs, and these are reflected in their plans. Interpreters are routinely used to gain young people's views when required. When young people's circumstances alter, or risks escalate, plans are changed to reflect these new circumstances. Plans are regularly reviewed, helping to ensure that they are progressed in a timely way.
38. Independent life skills for most care leavers are well supported. Young people are helped with self-care and financial management skills. When there is a need for greater support, PAs respond by increasing their own visits and organising extra support through external agencies. Independence skills are regularly reviewed in pathway plans and contingency plans are included should young people need extra help in the future.

39. The physical and emotional health needs of care leavers are identified promptly and responded to quickly. Therapeutic support is offered by the local authority's looked after therapist or by commissioned services. Some young people, however, have not had access to their health history, which prevents them fully understanding and managing their own health needs.
40. The local offer for care leavers in Hounslow is clear and accessible to them. It mostly identifies the range of practical, financial and emotional support available. The offer is well embedded, with PAs ensuring that young people are aware of their rights and entitlements up to the age of 21. For care leavers over 21, including those in education and employment, the local offer is not sufficiently clear about what support they will be offered or their entitlements.
41. Most care leavers in Hounslow are living in suitable accommodation. There is a wide range of semi-independent accommodation available which can be tailored to individual independence needs. When young people move into their own accommodation, tenancy support is provided when needed, to ensure that they are well supported and can sustain their own tenancies.
42. Care leavers receive effective support from their PAs and the virtual college to help them to secure employment, education or training, including work experience, apprenticeships and entry into higher education. At a multi-agency weekly drop-in, young people are helped to plan their next steps, develop their CVs, prepare applications for work and practise their interview skills. Most young people who are not in education, training or employment are in touch with their PAs and other support services, who continue to provide them with enrichment opportunities.
43. Care leavers are able to contribute their views and influence the design and improvement of services for young people in Hounslow through the Care Leavers Forum and participation in the corporate parenting panel.
44. Care leavers in custody are supported effectively by their PAs through regular visits. Workers continue to be aspirational for their future and pathway plans reflect this, encouraging the take-up of educational opportunities. Joint risk assessments undertaken with the probation service identify accommodation options for care leavers on their release from custody.

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

45. The highly visible senior leadership team relentlessly champions children, within the council, the local area partnership and in the wider London context. They have made comprehensive and sustained improvements to services since the last inspection. The lead member rallies strong support across political colleagues for children's services and has the knowledge and ability to hold



senior officers to account. The One Hounslow approach ensures that vulnerable children's needs are embedded in the council's corporate approach.

46. The chief executive is a strong advocate for children, with a detailed and accurate understanding of children's services. The lead member and the chief executive receive regular data and practice reports that aid their understanding of and challenge to the quality of social work. This is deepened through regular meetings with children and young people. The child improvement board, chaired by the chief executive, ensures that there is a regular, structured review of children's services in which senior officers are held to account for the quality of practice.
47. The council is an ambitious and aspirational corporate parent, recognising that there are always things that could be done differently and looking to do things better to improve outcomes for children. The corporate parenting panel is an effective place for scrutiny of services and the creation of ambitious service developments for children in care and care leavers. Children's participation is firmly embedded in Hounslow. This is evident in children being pivotal to decisions made about them, such as chairing their own reviews, and active wider service involvement through social work, foster carer training and involvement with the corporate parenting panel.
48. The responsive and agile senior leadership team knows its services well. Children's services have been significantly strengthened and improved, particularly in the delivery of help and protection. Detailed data and performance reports are used diligently to provide a line of sight to practice. There is ongoing dialogue between senior leaders, all members of staff and with children and their parents. This deepens the understanding of leaders of the quality of practice in the service.
49. A strong learning culture is evident throughout Hounslow children's services. The responsiveness of senior leaders to change allows managers and workers to acknowledge difficulties and seek proactive solutions. The quality assurance framework embodies this culture through the involvement in the process of practitioners, children and parents. Workers are involved in reflective conversations focused on the quality and impact of their work. The quality assurance framework ensures that the wider organisational learning is captured and reviewed throughout the organisation, including by the chief executive and lead member. This means that leaders and managers at all levels understand the quality of service delivery and the areas that need focus.
50. The local authority has developed impressive, strong and mature relationships with key partners. Senior managers nurture and protect these relationships to ensure highly effective collaborative working. Partners view the local authority as child-focused, offering an effective service that is proactive in responding to children's changing needs. These strong relationships have allowed the local

authority to develop a highly coherent and timely multi-agency response to areas such as early help.

51. The senior leadership team is child-focused and highly responsive to changing circumstances. The recent increase in the number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children has had a significant impact on the local authority and its partners. However, senior leaders have been proactive in identifying the level of need very quickly and in mobilising additional capacity, shaping both the local authority and partners' responses effectively. This has ensured that, for most of these children and young people, their needs are comprehensively met.
52. The number and range of placements for children in Hounslow is an area of challenge. In response, the local authority has developed a substantive sufficiency strategy that is ambitious and determined in its efforts to improve the range and choice of placements for children in care and care leavers.
53. Many staff who spoke to inspectors described a strong loyalty to Hounslow. They readily explain why they enjoy working in the borough, referring particularly to easy access to managers, a high level of management oversight and support and joint working with internal and external partners. Social workers receive regular supervision, which is well recorded and reflective. This helps practitioners to make a difference to children and their families.
54. The senior leadership team's unremitting focus on children's needs has led to a workforce who understand their children and work very effectively to support them. However, there are some workers whose caseloads are too high. This has not, as yet, impacted on the quality of service delivery. There is strong and effective oversight of work by managers at all levels to support workers. This is regular and reflective and ensures that workers are learning their role, prioritising their work and progressing assessments and plans for children.
55. Hounslow has a comprehensive training offer and defined career pathways, and a clear and robust offer of training and oversight for social workers in the assessed and supported year of employment that allows them to learn incrementally. They receive intensive and tailored training, reflective supervision and regular feedback from parents and children. Focused, specific training allows social workers to increase their levels of responsibility alongside increasing their knowledge. This means that most workers and managers are well prepared for their roles. There is a comprehensive workforce strategy in place in Hounslow, helping to increase both the recruitment and retention of permanent social workers.

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