

# Inspection of the London Borough of Ealing local authority children's services

**Inspection dates:** 22 April to 3 May 2024

**Lead inspector:** Tom Anthony, His Majesty's Inspector

<b>Judgement</b>	<b>Grade</b>
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children in care	Good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Services for children in Ealing have been strengthened since the last Ofsted inspection in 2019, when they were judged as requires improvement overall. Corporate leaders, including the leader of the council, the chief executive officer and the director of children's services, share a determination to continually improve the quality of service provided to children and their families. There has been a concerted effort to drive performance and practice standards across children's services. Recent developments include the creation of a dedicated assessment team and the successful engagement of partner agencies, including health and housing, to deliver targeted services to vulnerable children in the borough.

An effective programme of recruitment and retention has created a mostly permanent workforce, providing the bedrock for further improvement. Many of the areas identified as needing to improve at the last inspection have been strengthened. Improvements now in place include the response to homeless 16- and 17-year-olds, the quality and impact of management oversight, and the impact of oversight and challenge by independent reviewing officers (IROs). Social work caseloads across the organisation are well managed and enable practitioners to build strong relationships with children and their families.

Leaders are reflective and forward-looking. They embrace the challenge to deliver effective early help and statutory support with partner agencies. They continue their focus on exploring kinship options for children who need care away from their birth families. They are taking appropriate action to address the challenge to improve placement sufficiency. Leaders know that there is more work to do to ensure that all children in need of help and protection receive a consistent, timely and effective service and have a coherent plan to address these issues.

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

- The consistent identification of risk and effective, timely responses, including strategy meetings, when there are concerns about children's safety.
- The quality of multi-agency planning to improve safety and reduce risks for children who go missing from care and are vulnerable to exploitation.
- The pace and impact of activity to increase fostering capacity and improve placement options for children who need care.
- The quality and impact of management oversight of initial decision-making for children placed in kinship and family placements.
- Support for young carers.

### **The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: requires improvement to be good**

1. Decision-making in response to contacts received within the integrated front door is appropriate for most children and leads to the right tier of support being provided to help improve children's experiences. The majority of referrals are reviewed, and risk assessed appropriately and swiftly, with a clear expectation on timescales for carrying out the tasks assigned. Parental consent is carefully considered and recorded or appropriately overridden, when necessary, with a clear rationale for the decision.
2. A well-managed consultation service enables agencies to seek advice about appropriate steps to address concerns that they have regarding children's welfare. School leaders value the opportunity that this provides and recognise the positive steps that the local authority has taken to enhance the safeguarding of vulnerable children and young people.
3. When the threshold for statutory provision is not met, early help support is provided to children and families, with a clear rationale for support at this level of need. Early help assessments are underpinned by the views of children and families. Plans are targeted and focus on both the needs of children and their families. Goals are agreed with parents and children and in most cases make a positive difference to their lives. A small number of families who receive early help support experience minor delays when their level of need escalates, and

they require statutory support due to children's services not responding quickly enough.

4. The response to children and families who experience domestic abuse in Ealing is well developed. Practitioners recognise the impact of such behaviours on children and their families and identify appropriate interventions to minimise harm. Partner agencies attend a daily multi-agency risk assessment conference, where plans of action are formulated and agreed to help to improve children's lives.
5. For a minority of children, strategy meetings have not been convened swiftly enough. This is due to a variety of reasons, including inappropriate initial risk assessment, minor delays in allocation and delays in step-up processes. The delay in holding strategy meetings means that initial actions are sometimes undertaken without obtaining sufficient information about children. In some cases, strategy meetings have not been used effectively to plan immediate steps to improve children's safety or to determine if the threshold for section 47 enquiries has been met. However, inspectors did not see any children who had been left in situations of immediate risk of harm.
6. Most assessments are informed by the views of children, their families and partner agencies. Play and direct work are used well to understand children's experiences and to capture their views. In stronger examples, assessment of children's needs is timely, comprehensive and well written, with clear analysis of presenting issues and the interventions necessary to meet children's needs. Midway management reviews help to monitor and quality assure the progress of assessments.
7. Child protection and child-in-need plans focus on the things that matter most to make children safer. Plans make clear what change is needed and who is responsible, within defined time frames. Regular core group and child-in-need review meetings are well attended. In these meetings, professionals and families keep children's progress under review and plans are amended when required.
8. Child protection conferences are well attended by relevant professionals, with child protection conference chairs routinely speaking to parents before conferences. Few children attend their conferences, although social workers consistently make an effort to speak to them before the conference to enable their views to be represented.
9. Children benefit from the regular visits they get from their social workers. Records of visits are consistently skilfully and sensitively written to the child. Children with child protection plans are seen at a frequency consistent with their level of need and increased visits are undertaken when risks are seen to escalate. Social workers are tenacious in their efforts to establish working relationships with parents who may be distrustful.

10. Disabled children are well supported by social workers who have an in-depth understanding about their health needs, methods of communication and how best to support children to be able to voice their views about the care they receive. Social workers have a good understanding of children's medication and complex treatment plans, as well as detailed multi-agency risk management plans.
11. The response to supporting children who go missing from care or are at risk of criminal and/or sexual exploitation is not consistently robust. Social workers and family support workers build trusting relationships with children to provide them with a safe adult to speak to about the risks that they face. This helps to keep children safe. Workers are creative and flexible in their efforts to undertake return home interviews at a time and place that the child has chosen. However, there is an absence of consistent multi-agency safety planning to reduce the risks of exploitation that some children face.
12. Practitioners undertake effective intensive work with children, including for children at risk of exploitation. They draw on a good range of suitable resources, including the in-house Rapid Engagement for Adolescents and Children service, to help families stay together and reduce the need for children to enter care.
13. Arrangements in respect of the pre-proceedings phase of the Public Law Outline are mostly strong. However, a small number of children are subject to these arrangements for too long. Leaders know that the quality of letters issued before proceedings to identify what needs to change for children is variable and have plans to ensure these provide the necessary clarity.
14. Children aged 16 and 17 years old who present as homeless or at risk of homelessness receive a well-developed, effective and swift response that focuses on their safety and support needs, which are thoroughly and comprehensively assessed. A well-attended At Risk of Homelessness panel brings together a range of relevant professionals, including housing and social care staff, to review relevant children and create bespoke multi-agency plans to meet their needs. Children are made aware of their rights and entitlements and enter care when this is in their best interests.
15. Children who are young carers are not always made aware of the support and services that are available. The service is underdeveloped, and the assessments vary in quality and in the understanding of young carers' experiences.
16. The local authority is working effectively at a strategic level to support children and young people's attendance at school. The introduction of, for example, the therapeutic schools' initiative has had a positive impact on attendance. Attendance levels have improved more quickly in these schools and there has been a reduction in suspensions. Moreover, overall attendance levels are rising

and persistent absence is reducing in primary and secondary, and at special schools.

17. The local authority works hard to successfully identify children who are missing education. Where children are missing education, the local authority undertakes suitable checks to identify their whereabouts. Where children and young people are not identified, staff continue to work to establish where they are and their efforts have been successful, including when they had permanently moved overseas.
18. The local authority designated officer service in Ealing is effective in responding appropriately to concerns about adults who work with children. Strong relationships within children's social care and with external agencies, and a comprehensive tracking system, ensure that such concerns are dealt with thoroughly.
19. Children in Ealing who need support out of hours receive an appropriate and effective response. There are good arrangements in place for children to be accommodated at short notice when their circumstances warrant such intervention.

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

20. Decisions for children to come into care are made in their best interests and help to keep them safe. Skilful direct work provides a comprehensive understanding of children's experiences and informs the plans that are made for them. Most children in care are achieving positive outcomes.
21. Care for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is a significant strength. Children are warmly welcomed; they make progress, and they quickly get the services that they need to help them feel safe and supported.
22. When required, children benefit from high-quality court work, with succinct, factual social work evidence and sensible plans involving family, and family placements, where appropriate. Children's views and wishes clearly inform plans for their care.
23. Kinship care is a clear priority in Ealing for children who cannot live safely with their birth families. Effective engagement with children and adults is promoting change and creating increased opportunities for children to live within their wider family networks. Most children in kinship arrangements are making good progress, with both children and their carers receiving effective individualised support.
24. Viability assessments of carers for children in extended family arrangements are detailed, with appropriate safeguarding checks undertaken and a careful

consideration of strengths and vulnerabilities. For a very few children, assessments, checks and support for the placement have been delayed.

25. Most children make good and consistent progress in care. When there are concerns about the stability of children's placements, effective support is put in place to engage with children and help carers to respond to any pressures. This has enhanced placement stability for children in foster care.
26. Disabled children in care receive highly tailored and carefully considered support from practitioners who know them and their families well.
27. Foster carers feel well supported and have developed positive working relationships with their supervisory social workers. They are complimentary about the support from social workers, who are readily available to them. Those who have needed out-of-hours support have received a prompt and helpful response.
28. Placement sufficiency challenges in foster care have led to some unusually young children living in residential care and to some placements breaking down as they do not fully meet the child's needs.
29. The local authority makes stringent efforts to avoid the use of unregistered provision, with a very small number of children living in unregistered children's homes. The oversight of these arrangements is not always strong enough to allow for the local authority to have effective oversight of these placements to ensure that the quality of care is in line with children's presenting needs. Senior leaders took immediate action to rectify this while inspectors were on site.
30. Children's health needs are very well identified and responded to effectively. Regular health checks and good use of strengths and difficulties questionnaires help pick up any concerns about children's health and emotional well-being. When any specific needs are identified, relevant emotional health support is quickly put in place to support children's well-being.
31. Statutory reviews are chaired by IROs who know their children well and are a stable presence in their lives. They monitor progress and when challenge is needed, they have influence. Workers visit children at a frequency in line with their needs and they are alert to any vulnerabilities or emerging risks. When any concerns emerge, workers are proactive in identifying additional support for both children and their carers.
32. Children's records are of a consistently high standard. Workers write their records to children, with considerable warmth and empathy. Records provide a clear picture of the circumstances that have led to children entering care and explain the decisions made for them. Information about their parents is balanced and respectful, reflecting non-judgemental practice with families.

33. The relationships that social workers and family support workers build with children are effective and supportive, helping to mitigate any risks of harm. They understand children's experiences and underlying trauma, and work with others to help build their resilience. Independent visitors and advocates are proactive in providing valuable support to children in care.
34. Safety planning when children in care have periods when they go missing from care does not consistently lead to timely, effective multi-agency action plans. A few children have been made more vulnerable as limited placement choices have meant that they are unhappy where they live.
35. There is a strong focus on helping children to repair and sustain relationships with important people in their lives. Family group conferences are used well to help children grow networks that will be a source of resilience for them in the future.
36. Most reunification decisions are very well considered. A good range of resources helps children to make progress following reunification, preventing the need for children to return to becoming looked after.
37. Tailored academic support and enrichment activities help most children in care make good and sustained progress in their education, with better independent learning and development of new skills. Children who have to change schools when moving into placements are offered specific tailored support to help them settle and progress in their new schools.
38. Some children's personal education plans (PEPs) are not as purposeful as they should be. Leaders are taking action to address this, including introducing electronic PEPs.
39. Children in care enjoy a wide range of hobbies and interests and they are encouraged by their carers to try new activities. Social workers and children's carers understand the value of shared experiences that can help create a sense of belonging for children.
40. There is a strong focus on achieving permanence for children. Planning and tracking start early, with clear direction evident in children's records. Purposeful and timely permanence planning is evident for children, with careful analysis of all permanence options. Social work teams and the regional adoption agency (Adopt London West) work well together, carefully considering matches for children. Adopters and special guardians are supported well. Workers actively consider children's cultures, religions, heritage and identities in care planning.

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

41. Care leavers are supported by dedicated and caring staff who know them well and build important relationships with them. Care leavers' involvement in

creating their own plans and their participation in a range of consultation forums are significant strengths. Workers visit care leavers regularly and in line with their needs. Care leavers benefit from a range of social and recreational activities and value the opportunities to link with workers and other care leavers.

42. For some care leavers, a shortage of move-on accommodation means that they are in accommodation that does not fully support their move towards independence or the skills needed for adult life.
43. Allocated workers are aspirational for care leavers and advocate forcibly on their behalf. Independent advocacy is available from a commissioned service and care leavers' views are also championed through a dedicated additional 18+ IRO.
44. Well-written, co-produced pathway plans provide detailed analysis of care leavers' circumstances and set out the short-term action that is needed to help them to make progress. This includes plans for care leavers over the age of 21. The specialist IRO provides additional oversight and support for those care leavers with more complex needs.
45. Workers continually assess the well-being of the care leavers whom they support. They understand and identify when care leavers have particular emotional and mental health needs. Inspectors saw the positive impact that the dedicated health professional brings to care leavers in Ealing. They can identify when specialist health support is required and enable care leavers to access this.
46. The local offer to care leavers is explicit about rights and entitlements, including clarity about the assistance that care leavers will receive. This includes access to laptops and smartphones and ensuring that they have internet and Wi-Fi access in placement or payments to fund this for their first year in their tenancy; this helps care leavers to avoid digital poverty. Similarly, help to meet travel costs or access to bike schemes and other entitlements are clearly explained. Care leavers told inspectors about the positive difference entitlements in the local offer had made for them.
47. Care leavers can readily access key documents such as passports and birth certificates, and have information about their health, health services and the workers available to them.
48. Care leavers who are parents are supported well and the needs of care leavers in custody are considered carefully. Work with former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is a strength and they receive tangible support into adulthood.
49. Pathway plans have a strong focus on tackling any discrimination that care leavers might experience. Workers recognise the need to balance safeguarding



while allowing care leavers opportunities to gain life skills and achieve independence. Access to legal support and psychology support helps workers to understand and respond to risks for care leavers.

50. Older care leavers who no longer have a dedicated leaving care worker can access valuable and impactful support from the After Care Service. This encompasses all aspects of need, including help to complete their immigration applications and swift access to financial advice and health services. Care leavers benefit from the relationships the leaving care team have brokered with Ealing Law Centre, Connexions staff, finance advisers, housing officers and health specialists, and are able to get swift access to the support that they need due to these professional relationships.
51. Impressive numbers of care leavers in Ealing attend university and further education, and workers make sure that care leavers have effective support to gain employment, education or further training, including apprenticeships and paid employment in the council. Care leavers also benefit from ongoing support from the virtual school.
52. The local authority has extensively consulted with care leavers to help them in the production of housing plans and strategies. They have increased their social housing quota and have two specialist posts within housing and the leaving care team. This helps to mitigate, but does not fully resolve, the issues caused by care leavers not having priority banding for social housing. Some care leavers are not able to move on to more independent accommodation when they are ready to do so because of a lack of such provision.

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

53. Leaders demonstrate a sharp awareness of areas for development and have a realistic programme of work to deliver improvements to services for children. They have successfully improved the quality of services to children in care and care leavers since the last inspection. Agile political, corporate and operational services provide clear strategic direction for children's services. This is firmly rooted in an ambition to provide help at the earliest opportunity and to further improve the quality of support to all children and care leavers. Leaders know the areas where improvements need to be made. Leaders recognise that for a few vulnerable children, there is more to do to ensure a timely response to their needs.
54. Managers are aware of the challenges in finding placements that meet the needs of all children in Ealing. The lack of choice is having some impact on the experience of a small number of children in care and care leavers. Managers have an ambitious vision for the fostering service. The planned implementation of national and local programmes aims to increase fostering capacity and sufficiency, and to strengthen foster carer support. However, the service is not

supported by sufficiently robust performance management systems and this reduces managers' ability to have effective oversight of progress.

55. Recruitment and retention of a suitably qualified workforce are an absolute priority for leaders in Ealing. Leaders know that the workforce is the key to making a difference to children's lives. Alongside mostly permanent social workers, clinical psychologists and family support workers attached to frontline teams are having a tangible impact on children's lives. A clear practice model brings coherence to the way in which practitioners support children and their families.
56. Practitioners like working in Ealing and value the opportunities and support that they receive. Inspectors met several staff who have returned to work in Ealing as an authority of choice after experiencing working in other authorities.
57. The council is an ambitious corporate parent and is aware that further developments are needed to improve the experiences and progress of children and care leavers. The voice of children in care and care leavers articulated through different representative groups is clearly evident in the deliberations of the corporate parenting board.
58. Partnership arrangements are strong. Partners are successfully engaged in strategic and operational activity geared at improving the experiences and progress of children in Ealing. The joint work with housing officers is especially impressive. The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service and the judiciary are very positive about the level of communication and joint working in Ealing. They express confidence about decision-making and the quality of practice that they observe. The safeguarding partnership recognises the key areas for practice development and provides an effective challenge to improve services for children and families.
59. A broad range of training and development is on offer to support workers to continually develop their skills and knowledge. Staff value the training offer made available to them through Ealing's Social Care Academy. They particularly appreciate the helpful bite-sized lunchtime sessions that provide learning opportunities without taking them away from practice for a whole day. Staff also spoke positively about the support available to them from the principal social worker. This support sits alongside the highly valued use of well-structured group supervision that enables staff to reflect on how best to help the children they support.
60. Across the service, there is now a consistent level of management oversight on children's records. Social workers have regular supervision, which offers some reflection and helps practitioners to make a difference to children and their families. For some children at risk of significant harm or in kinship care arrangements, management decision-making has not always been swift or

thorough enough to ensure that necessary safeguarding checks and multi-agency planning are completed at the right time.

61. A well-developed range of audit activity helps leaders to maintain a clear line of sight to frontline practice performance information and is used to monitor and plan for improvements. Audit moderation picks up most gaps in case work, and identifies any areas where improvement is necessary. Current activity to further advance the quality and impact of internal auditing demonstrates the ambition to maximise learning opportunities.
62. A detailed range of performance information in the main is used effectively at different levels of the organisation to understand performance and enable action to be taken. This is not identifying gaps in some areas, such as performance in the fostering service.
63. At all levels, inspectors saw how staff value children in care and care leavers as experts on their own lives. The local authority has recently relaunched a Children in Care Council to increase participation of younger children in care. The authority has also taken the decision to recognise 'care experienced' as a protected characteristic.
64. The local authority responds to children's complaints swiftly and fairly, giving children an apology if relevant and a space where their wishes and feelings are heard.
65. Inspectors met with an impressive group of children in care and care leavers, who spoke mostly very positively about the care and support that they receive.

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