

Inspection of Barnet local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 10 to 14 June 2024

Lead inspector: Naintara Khosla, 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	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Children in the London Borough of Barnet receive strong and effective services. A stable and committed leadership team has continued to strengthen and enhance social work practice since the previous inspection in 2019. Child-focused, strategic and operational leadership, allied with strong corporate and political support, has led to considerable investment in children's services, providing an increasingly stable workforce, a specialist service for children with autism, a specialist early years parenting hub and improved sufficiency of foster care and residential provision for children.

A comprehensive, child-focused and collaborative auditing programme accurately informs leaders about the quality of frontline practice. In most areas, the quality and impact of practice are strong, and children and families benefit from knowledgeable, committed staff, and staff are well supported by knowledgeable and committed managers. Leaders are aware of discrete areas for improvement and have a strong focus on and track record in delivering continuous improvement.

Leaders in Barnet are confident about what they do and are ambitious for children, ensuring that they progress and do well. Children in care, whether in borough or placed further afield, benefit from outstanding support and services.

What needs to improve?

- Return home interviews informing safety plans for children who go missing.
- Communication about living arrangements for care leavers.
- Timeliness of early help support.
- Management oversight of the local authority designated officer (LADO).

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

1. An impressive multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) is overseen by a confident and experienced manager. Effective systems in the MASH are in place and team managers consistently sign off all contacts with a supporting rationale which clearly identifies the level of prioritisation and outlines the next steps necessary.
2. Parental consent is considered, and when necessary, it is overridden. Ethnicity and diversity information is routinely sought, and information is included on contact records to inform assessments at the earliest opportunity.
3. Skilled, competent social workers recognise risk factors and wider issues in the family, including children who are young carers. Young carers are routinely considered in MASH assessments, and discussions are had with parents about the impact on children so that children's circumstances are understood. Therefore, children are identified early for additional services.
4. There are clear and effective arrangements in place for children to step across following MASH triage to an experienced early help coordinator. Strong team manager oversight at the point of referral provides clear guidance and actions to inform early help services. Children and families benefit from a range of targeted early help provision delivered by staff who understand their lived experiences. Thresholds between early help and social care are well understood and applied appropriately. Escalating risk or need is recognised and results in timely referrals to children's social care followed by a mostly swift response. For a small number of children, when early help support is identified for families, there is sometimes a short delay in workers being allocated, and therefore they do not receive services expeditiously.
5. When information is received from referrers indicating the need for an urgent response, these referrals are passed to social workers for assessment. Prompt and effective action is taken to safeguard and protect children at risk of immediate harm.
6. Social worker assessments in the MASH are detailed and explore the full history of a family's previous involvement with services. Workers are skilled at seeking the views of parents and carers and work effectively with them to understand their experiences of previous support and what will be helpful to them in the

future. Children identified for follow-up assessments by the duty and assessment teams (DAT) are allocated swiftly so that children's needs are reviewed and progressed without delay.

7. Strategy meetings held in the DAT are convened promptly, with consistent attendance from partners. Meetings are effective in using all the information from partners and include family history to appropriately reflect the concerns about children. This informs decision-making to reduce risks for children.
8. Joint investigations with police are used effectively to consider the need for achieving best evidence interviews and/or medical assessments. Strategy meeting records contain clear actions, children are seen quickly, and safety plans address the immediate steps needed to protect children.
9. Visits to children are regular and purposeful, with meaningful discussions that help children share their world. Direct work supports children to build trusting relationships with workers. However, the quality of records does not always reflect the richness of the work carried out. For a small number of children, there is a missed opportunity to see them alone, so children are not always provided with a trusted adult to speak with.
10. Assessments are detailed, contain multi-agency partner information and articulate parents' and children's views. They reflect workers' analytical understanding of risks and what needs to happen next. Safety planning is carried out as part of the assessment process; however, some safety plans are not always recorded clearly and consistently on children's files. Social workers are effective and tenacious in building relationships so that families are supported to engage positively with children's services, helping to improve children's lives.
11. Partner agencies and parents consistently attend child protection conferences. Conference chairs and social workers engage well with children to explain to them the purpose of the meeting. They have access to co-produced, creative media tools to engage children, which allows children to successfully attend and have their views included in meetings.
12. Child-in-need and child protection plans are regularly reviewed with key partners to support children and help reduce risk, and most children's lives improve. For many children on plans, the quality of plans and tangible support for parents as well as children positively impacts on children's welfare and consequent reduction in risk. Where risks do not reduce and are escalating, action is taken promptly so that children are safer. For a small number of children where there are repeat plans, progress has been insufficient when the drive to engage with parents has overshadowed the impact on the lived experiences of children. While social workers articulate risk, and understand neglect and emotional harm, tools to assist with the assessment of neglect or emotional harm, including chronologies, are not consistently used to inform children's needs.

13. Disabled children who are subject to child-in-need and child protection plans have their needs met in a timely way, with all the children in the family being allocated the same social worker when it is in their interests to do so to provide consistency. A range of creative direct work tools are used by social workers in the disabled children's service to support effective and purposeful communication with children in line with their needs.
14. In the disabled children's service, children are regularly seen alone. Social workers spend time capturing their views, wishes and feelings and take account of their understanding.
15. The LADO raises their profile and role so that professionals can appropriately refer their concerns about people who may be a risk to children. The interface between the LADO and the MASH safeguarding processes for children is not sufficiently integrated, so information about adult risk and connected children does not always benefit from recorded, timely oversight by MASH managers.
16. Strong, effective senior management oversight is embedded in the management of the pre-proceedings processes of the Public Law Outline. A comprehensive pre-proceedings tracker is an effective tool that provides senior leaders with a line of sight into social work practice and an understanding of cumulative harm. Planning for children is coherent and risks reduce, or when interventions are ineffective, action is taken to issue legal proceedings. Social workers take time to discuss the contents of pre-proceedings letters, which are carefully crafted, and parents confirmed that this helps them to understand concerns workers have about their care of children.
17. Multi-agency information-sharing takes place at multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARAC) and informs plans to reduce risks to children. When domestic abuse is the prevailing risk factor for children, social workers assess risks well. The impact of domestic abuse on children is well understood and articulated clearly in assessments. Intervention helps parents understand their experiences of domestic abuse.
18. When children are at risk of going missing and exploitation, they receive a mostly effective service from the specialist exploitation team. When concerns are escalating, multi-agency child exploitation and missing meetings or strategy meetings are appropriately held to agree the steps necessary to disrupt perpetrators and reduce risks, to keep children safer.
19. When children go missing from home or care, appropriate actions are taken to ensure their safety. For some children, return home interviews are not consistently completed and lack the necessary detail to understand why children are going missing. This does not help the safeguarding partnership to understand the reasons children go missing and does not inform safety planning to help keep children safer.

20. Children who live in private fostering arrangements benefit from a timely service that assesses and responds to needs well.
21. The emergency duty service is a well-run service which provides effective support out of hours with a timely transfer to daytime services.
22. An effective joint housing protocol assists social workers to support young people who present as homeless. Thorough social work assessments identify risks and needs well, and young people are provided with support that takes account of their individual needs. Workers clearly inform them of their entitlements and rights.
23. Effective systems are in place so that children who are missing education or who are electively home educated are known and consistently reviewed. Designated school leads value the safeguarding support and the professional supervision provided by the Barnet educational psychologist, which assists in appropriate decision-making for children's welfare.

The experiences and progress of children in care: outstanding

24. Children in care receive an outstanding level of help and support. Decisions for children to come into care are appropriate and informed by good-quality assessments, helping to keep them safe. Children's care plans are very well considered before entry into care. Family networks are carefully explored, enabling children to remain with their extended families when it is in their interests to do so. Permanence is timely, securing stability and reducing delay. This is overseen by highly productive panels and permanence planning meetings to secure timely decision-making.
25. Most children, including disabled children in care, live in stable homes with carers who provide an excellent standard of care and know them well. Children and their carers are supported effectively by skilled workers. As a result, they make significant tangible progress.
26. Children's care needs are well explored and assessed and inform care planning effectively. Care is taken to ensure matching with homes that can meet their level of need, including residential care for those for whom this is the most positive option. This impacts positively on children's experience of stability.
27. Children in care who live in and outside of the borough have excellent support provided by their social workers. Social workers have caseloads which enable them to spend time with children, helping them to build trusting relationships. Social workers are skilled, experienced and ambitious for children. Detailed records of visits demonstrate that social workers develop warm, positive and caring relationships with children. Children's needs, including unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, are compassionately considered by workers who take the time to understand their journeys to the UK and respond sensitively to any associated trauma.

28. Children with complex needs are met by experienced social workers who understand their unique needs and disabilities exceptionally well. Children with autism receive help from the expertise in the specialist autism team, whose members have smaller caseloads, enabling these social workers to be available in times of crisis. Social workers provide interventions with the whole family, collaborating with other professionals where there are assessed needs, to ensure that disabled children, their brothers, sisters and parents are supported.
29. Children's living arrangements are regularly reviewed. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) engage very well with children and successfully gather children's wishes and feelings before the meeting. IROs consider all children's needs effectively at reviews and identify appropriate actions to ensure that children's health, education, identity and social needs are very well met. This informs children's care planning and ensures that children's need for family time is well considered alongside their social, health and education needs so that they make excellent progress. The IROs maintain comprehensive oversight of the progress of children's care plans between reviews to ensure that they are being implemented without delay.
30. The records of review meetings are written sensitively and directly to the child, providing information about their history, care plan, decision-making and information about their development. This allows children to have a continuous and evolving life-story record to understand their experiences as they grow into adulthood. Review decisions are sometimes delayed, so children's records are not always easy to navigate.
31. Permanence planning is very well embedded and prominent in the plans made for children, with the permanency panel providing a constructive forum which supports and scrutinises care planning. Children's individual needs are considered very well, and specialist resources are commissioned when necessary. Management oversight at the panel provides confirmation and assurance for children that they can remain with their carers long term when this is their assessed plan.
32. Deprivation of liberty orders are appropriately considered when there is a need to restrict children's liberty. The disabled children's service is particularly impressive as children benefit from the considered and careful work which reduces risk and the level of need, which gradually helps children to settle successfully in their homes, allowing the order to come to an end.
33. The IROs ensure that review meetings help plan key multi-agency interventions to facilitate children's return home when appropriate and the support necessary to ensure that such plans endure. Brothers and sisters live together whenever possible. Comprehensive social worker and expert assessments inform decisions for children to return home. Assessments are timely, including a clear understanding of any risks. Services are provided for both parents and children so that such arrangements can be sustained.

34. A very small number of children with highly complex needs live in unregistered children's homes. These arrangements are very closely monitored and the search to identify registered provision to meet children's needs is an ongoing process undertaken expeditiously. The local authority takes active measures to encourage such providers to register with Ofsted without delay.
35. Direct work creatively helps children to understand their families and their life experiences. Life-story books and later life letters are skilfully written with pictures and memories for children to reflect on as they grow up. The books and letters provide children with a sense of their history, family, culture and identity.
36. Children in care maintain contact with people who are important in their lives. Arrangements for family time are thoughtful and consider risk factors alongside the child's wishes. This includes full engagement of the wider family to remain involved in children's futures.
37. The virtual school is very well led by dedicated, experienced leaders who are supported by committed and skilled staff. The team is imaginative and flexible in ensuring that each child gets the right support at the right time, enabling children to make significant progress in their education outcomes. Schools are overwhelmingly positive about the strong contribution of the educational psychology service through its provision of professional supervision. Personal education plans are of high quality; they are purposeful and bespoke and reflect the voice of the child. Clear goals and targets are identified, and these are reviewed effectively at subsequent meetings. The virtual school works effectively with partners to provide strong practical support for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, for example helping them get to know and navigate the education opportunities on offer. Children benefit from a wide range of enrichment and non-academic learning opportunities.
38. Children's health needs, including the needs of asylum-seeking children, are considered well. Health assessments and dental and optician checks are arranged in a timely manner for children, and, when identified, specific bespoke health needs are very well supported.
39. Emotional health for children is comprehensively considered through the completion of strengths and difficulties questionnaires and this informs the provision of services. Emotional health support for children is strong. Virtually all children receive a persistent offer of therapeutic support. Even when refused, it is revisited.
40. Pathway plans are completed for children reflective of their level of need. Children's views, wishes and feelings are routinely sought and recorded in their pathway plans, alongside their current needs and aspirations.
41. Supervising social workers provide strong support for foster carers and know their carers well. Foster carers speak highly of the support they receive, with access to support groups and opportunities for training.

42. Barnet is part of a regional adoption agency (Adopt London North). Early permanence is a strength due to effective, strong and collaborative working with Barnet Children's Services, which has an effective specialist adoption worker. The adoption service is ambitious for children and has successfully sought to create a wider choice of adoptive homes through a more inclusive recruitment approach. Children benefit from the availability of adopters from a range of backgrounds. Adopters report receiving very helpful adoption support provision both for them and their children. The agency decision-maker is a confident expert in permanence who attends care planning panels, providing additional oversight of children's care plans.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

43. Most care leavers in Barnet get the support they need at the right time. The Onwards and Upwards Service provides a flexible and accessible hub for care leavers. Situated close to transport links with a homely feel, care leavers can access a wide range of support services that enable them to build positive relationships with their peers and be part of an inclusive care leaving community. Cultural celebrations are promoted and opportunities to share experiences and participate in a range of activities is actively encouraged.

44. Staff in the Onwards and Upwards Service are compassionate, thoughtful and sensitive to the needs of care leavers. Personal advisers (PAs) and the wider service offer through the Onwards and Upwards Service help care leavers to manage the challenges and opportunities of adulthood successfully. This includes encouraging attendance at courses such as the accredited living skills course and support to build positive relationships through enrichment activities.

45. PAs ensure that they keep in touch with their young people, using a range of methods, and positive support continues beyond the age of 25 as part of Barnet's lifelong care leaver offer.

46. A comprehensive local offer, co-produced with care leavers, is accessible and published online. Entitlements include exemptions for council tax payments for young people living in and outside the borough.

47. Young people are provided with all the necessary documents they need as they move into adulthood, and care leavers have access to their full health histories. The health needs of care leavers are prioritised, with bespoke mental health services available to support care leavers.

48. Most care leavers have pathway plans that reflect their needs. Pathway plans are often informed by care leavers and contain their views. However, the quality of pathway plans is too variable. Better plans set out updated circumstances when there are significant changes in care leavers' situations. Some plans do not reflect the depth and aspiration PAs have for their care leavers, and they do not set out any risk factors or include the input from professional networks.

49. While PAs recognise the significance of young people's relationships with their family, carers and friends and actively support them to maintain these important links, this is not always reflected in their pathway plans.
50. PAs and other support services offered through the Onwards and Upwards Service actively promote the importance of education or employment with young people, with additional support provided by career advisers and a range of external agencies.
51. Some children in care are not linked to their PAs in a timely manner. This is at a point close to PAs becoming their allocated source of support. This hinders the development of a trusting relationship at a crucial point in care leavers' lives when they are moving into adulthood.
52. A small number of children experience late moves into adulthood. Review meetings consider longer-term planning but do not always provide children with clear and timebound plans clarifying their living arrangements post 18. Therefore, some children experience insecurity and are not properly prepared for their future.
53. A range of professionals provide good support to care leavers who are parents. However, for some PAs, there is confusion about the procedures and when it is appropriate to refer care leavers who are expecting a child to MASH. This does not take account of young people's individual circumstances and impacts on their willingness to engage with support. Most care leavers over 18 open to the Onwards and Upwards Service live in accommodation which meets their needs through established and constructive relationships with housing providers. When appropriate, care leavers remain with their foster carers under 'staying put' arrangements.
54. Care leavers in custody are provided with regular visits to assist with financial matters and emotional well-being, maintaining relationships outside prison.

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

55. Since the last inspection, committed and ambitious leaders have further developed and strengthened most services for children in Barnet. The chief executive officer (CEO) and the leader of the council are child centred and knowledgeable about children's services, their performance and pressures. This corporate and political support is evident through a child-centred approach which enables corporate parenting responsibilities to be owned across the whole council. For example, mature partnerships with housing colleagues to invest in accommodation have enabled the development of housing protocols that provide ring-fenced housing solutions for care leavers.
56. The CEO, leader, lead member and director of children's services (DCS) ensure that the voices of children are heard and central to any future policy

developments. Co-production is a strength and is embedded, with numerous opportunities for children to present and engage with leaders so that experiences of care and of wider services inform decision-making.

57. Mature and positive relationships with police, health and designated safeguarding leads in schools and other partners enable effective multi-agency safeguarding partnerships to be in place.
58. Local sufficiency issues in relation to homes for children in care are responded to well. Significant investment has been provided to develop new bespoke children's homes. There are very small numbers of vulnerable children who live in unregistered children's homes. These children are skilfully overseen by the DCS and the senior leadership team.
59. Leaders understand the complex environment in which they work, and their self-evaluation provides detailed information on their understanding of any challenges for children's social care. Managers were aware of nearly all the areas for improvement identified during this inspection. This helps to ensure that most children's needs are met consistently. Leaders seek to bring communities together positively, exemplified in recently achieving the status of a borough of sanctuary, welcoming child asylum seekers and providing care for adult asylum seekers.
60. The performance management framework helps leaders to manage performance across the service; however, some data collection needs further development. Leaders are aware of this and are taking action to ensure that accurate data relating to return home interviews, looked after reviews and children seen alone is available.
61. Audit information helps leaders to understand the quality of social work practice, helping to inform the development of the service so that children's experiences improve even further. Leaders have a very strong focus on engaging children and ensuring that their voices influence the way services are delivered. This is evident across all services and strongly evident in further developing the corporate parenting offer.
62. Leaders strive to develop the employment offer, and this includes foster carers with Barnet who are accredited as a 'Workforce Fostering Friendly' employer, enabling carers to access additional leave and payments. This is having a positive impact on foster care and social work staff recruitment.
63. There is careful monitoring of workloads, with systems in place to support staff, including supervision, reallocation of work and increased recruitment. The service has responded well to the increased volume of work by creating new services with a specialist autism team and unaccompanied asylum-seeking service. This means that children benefit from being able to see social workers regularly and build trusting relationships. Workers appreciate the training offer and have opportunities for both training delivered in the authority and also from external

experts. They particularly value the reflective practice sessions and consultations offered by Barnet Integrated Clinical Services.

64. Barnet staff are skilled, tenacious and passionate in their work with children. Many staff have benefited from a strong assessed and supported year in employment and 'grow your own' offer. Staff want to work for Barnet as they feel valued and appreciated. Many have worked in Barnet for several years and some staff who have left the authority have subsequently returned, saying that it felt like 'coming home'.

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