

Inspection of Islington local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 2 to 6 December 2024

Lead inspector: Sarah Canto, 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	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of children in care	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding

Children's experiences are at the heart of the local authority's thinking, planning and development of services. Child-focused corporate leaders and politicians relentlessly pursue solutions to meet the needs of the children and families in the London Borough of Islington. The local authority's relationship-based practice model is integrated throughout children's services, alongside early years and education services. Children benefit from being able to develop trusting relationships with practitioners whose consistent approach, support and time to help children reach their potential are transforming children's lives. Since the 2020 inspection, the experiences and progress of children in care, the House project, increased mental health support and the response to children who are missing or at risk of exploitation have gone from strength to strength. Senior leaders know their services very well and carry out a wide range of auditing activity to support their understanding of the impact of practice.

What needs to improve?

- The consistency of seeking children's and families' views in the auditing process.

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

1. The exceptionally wide range of effective early help services and support available in Islington make a tangible difference to children's and families' lives. Comprehensive early help assessments, undertaken with families, carefully consider families' unique circumstances, their strengths and needs. Family group conferences are used at the earliest possible point and throughout the child's journey, empowering families and friends to create their own plans and solutions to improve children's circumstances. The small number of children whose experiences do not improve with early help support are referred to statutory children's services in a timely way, for further exploration of their needs.
2. A well-used consultation line provides valuable support to wider partner agencies. It helps to develop a shared understanding of levels of need and what to do when there is a concern about a child. Social workers in the children's services contact team (CSCT) seek information from specialist workers, such as independent domestic violence advisers and exploitation specialists, to inform their analysis of children's needs. Checks undertaken with partner agencies are proportionate and relevant.
3. Robust and prompt management oversight of referrals in the CSCT results in appropriate actions for children being initiated without delay. Social workers' recommendations are well articulated and result in children receiving the right help at the right time.
4. Increased capacity in the emergency duty team has meant that social workers in this service provide a highly effective and timely response to children outside office hours.
5. When social workers in the CSCT consider that families would benefit from early help support, children are swiftly transferred to early help services. Some families need to wait for a short time for this service and managers maintain effective oversight of any changing needs during this time.
6. When a statutory assessment is required, children are promptly allocated to a social worker. They are seen quickly and, where appropriate, alone and on a number of occasions, to inform the assessment. Assessments of children's needs, including those of disabled children, are thorough. They fully consider family history, the views of children, relevant family members and professionals involved, and each child's unique characteristics, relating to their culture, experiences, religion, likes and interests. These detailed, high-quality assessments inform planning to improve children's safety and well-being.

7. When there are concerns about significant harm to children, strategy meetings take place promptly and are well attended by relevant partner agencies. Any resulting child protection investigations that follow are thorough. When child protection enquiries progress to an initial child protection conference, these result in a comprehensive multi-agency plan of protection for children if required.
8. Social workers visit children who are the subject of child protection and child in need plans in accordance with their needs. Children have skilled and consistent social workers. Due to manageable caseloads, social workers are able to spend time with children, building positive relationships. They use a range of creative direct-work tools to help children to express themselves. Safety plans are developed with children and parents to provide them with practical steps that help to keep children safer.
9. As part of child protection and child in need plans, children and families benefit from a wide range of high-quality interventions to help effect positive and sustained changes to children's lives. Strong professional networks provide a responsive, flexible team around the child to address the needs of every member of the family. Highly effective and creative interventions are used to address concerns around substance misuse, domestic abuse and mental ill-health. Assessments of conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder are expedited through the Adolescent Multi-agency Specialist Service (AMASS). For children who have experienced neglect, the increasing use of a neglect toolkit is helping to better understand their needs and measure whether their lives are improving. The input of specialist family support workers and targeted family support workers is helping to improve children's experiences and safety.
10. Child in need and child protection plans are comprehensive, with appropriate contingencies in place. Well-attended and regular core groups and child in need reviews enable effective information-sharing to monitor how well children's plans progress and the difference that they make. Most children on plans make tangible progress.
11. When improvements to children's safety are not achieved, the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline is initiated in a timely manner for most children. Parents are sensitively helped to understand the seriousness of concerns and are supported with making changes so that children's lives improve. This work results in many children being able to safely remain at home with their families. For those children who cannot remain safely at home, work undertaken in this phase is timely, and their circumstances are escalated into the family court arena.
12. Children who go missing and/or are at risk of exploitation receive exceptionally comprehensive and well-coordinated help and support that are highly effective in reducing risk to them. A coordinated approach between a wealth of services, including targeted youth support, the Adolescent Support Intervention Project

(ASIP) and I-CAN, which helps children who are involved in group-related violence, as well as voluntary organisations, means that children at risk have relationships with professionals who have knowledge and expertise relating to exploitation. Staff are highly skilled in carrying out direct work with children and in mapping and disruption work to make children safer.

13. Disabled children receive a highly effective service from their social workers. Assessments are comprehensive and plans are reviewed regularly to ensure that they continue to meet children's needs. Risks to children and their vulnerabilities are well understood and addressed. Consequently, child protection concerns are identified appropriately.
14. Children who live in private fostering arrangements benefit from detailed and updated assessments and their needs are well met.
15. Most 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless receive a comprehensive assessment of their needs. They are referred for advocacy to support their understanding of their rights and entitlements. When required, children become looked after.
16. Young carers in Islington benefit from a wide range of groups and activities where they can meet with peers, receive support and have fun. Senior managers are working on a system to increase the identification and assessment of young carers.
17. The local authority designated officer service is highly effective in its response to allegations against adults in a position of trust.
18. Leaders have robust oversight of children who are electively home educated or missing from education. They take appropriate action to support children's safety and well-being when concerns are identified.

The experiences and progress of children in care: outstanding

19. Children in care in Islington receive an exceptionally high level of support. As a consequence, most make very significant progress. Social workers explore available options to help children to remain at home, using edge of care services such as the adolescent multi-agency support service. There is an unwavering focus on children remaining within their wider family and community networks whenever possible. When children can no longer safely remain with their families, children come into care at the right time.
20. Children are continually encouraged and supported to see their family members, helping them to retain a positive sense of belonging. Plans for children to return home are robust and they are supported by assessments that identify relevant risks and strengths. Senior managers oversee the plans of those children placed at home, particularly when risks are greater. This was an area for improvement at the previous inspection that has now been addressed effectively.

21. Children benefit from a determined focus by managers on achieving permanence at the earliest opportunity. Early permanence placements are used to ensure that children can start making enduring and secure attachments as soon as possible. Managers actively track children's plans to avoid any delays in securing permanence. Brother and sister together and apart assessments are undertaken with a focus on keeping children together. For those children living with kinship carers, the local authority's 'no detriment' policy supports increased permanence through the use of special guardianship orders and effective support plans.
22. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in care are very well supported by impressive social workers and an array of community resources. When children arrive in Islington, their safety and welfare are promptly assessed, and timely progression is made with asylum applications to help children to feel settled. Initial health assessments have been developed to include psychological as well as physical assessments, to ensure that children have the help that they need.
23. Children are very well supported by skilled, committed and caring social workers who know them exceptionally well. Social workers meet with children in different environments and undertake purposeful direct work. Children's wishes and feelings are sought effectively using a variety of tools, and their views inform decision-making. Children's needs, their histories and the impact of earlier trauma are very well understood.
24. Children regularly attend their reviews and are listened to in relation to how and where their review is carried out, and who attends. Advocacy is consistently offered to children to ensure that they feel represented and their views are heard. Children in care who go missing or are at risk of exploitation receive an impressive and effective response, with close partner agency working. Children are supported by the specialist services of the exploitation and missing team, working alongside a range of other professionals to help keep them safe. Complex issues are explored in strategy meetings, which are attended by relevant professionals. Information is gathered from return home interviews which is used to identify locations and adults who may pose a risk to children. As a result, children in care are helped to be safer.
25. Children are supported to avoid being drawn into the criminal justice system. If children are remanded into custody, their workers visit them promptly. Their workers show care and an understanding of the risks and potential impact on the child.
26. Children's emotional and physical health needs are prioritised effectively and addressed well through detailed health plans. Nurses travel to children to carry out review health assessments, and children feel able to confide in them as a consistent person. Children benefit from detailed healthcare plans and health practitioners give helpful advice to social workers and carers, who work closely together.

27. Great attention is given to ensuring that children's emotional well-being and mental health are supported. Child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) are part of the children looked after service and provide invaluable support and consultation for social workers to assist them to develop bespoke work with children. As a result, children receive meaningful and personalised support to deal with issues such as trauma, poor mental health or substance misuse.
28. Children take part in a number of activities which they enjoy, such as swimming, going to clubs, music lessons and seeing their friends. Social workers and carers act positively to ensure that children have new and varied experiences, to support them to develop their skills.
29. Children receive strong support from the virtual school team to enable them to access the right educational setting and to remain in education. Personal education plans are used well to set goals and these are reviewed in a timely way. As a result of purposeful support, children make very good progress from their starting points.
30. Managers have excellent oversight of their most vulnerable children in care, and their proactive approach has resulted in children rarely living in unregistered children's homes. Supported accommodation is carefully considered and used only when this is the right option for children. Children live in homes where their needs are well met and where they thrive. As a result, children make good progress, and there are few placement breakdowns.
31. Detailed life-story work is carried out with children in care, which enables them to understand their care journeys. When children reach the age of 18, social workers write sensitive and detailed later-life letters to them, helping them to remember their experiences and explaining sensitively why decisions have been made.
32. The fostering service is led well and functions effectively. Foster carers receive comprehensive support and training from a stable and experienced staff team. Interventions informed by clinical guidance enhance the quality of support that foster carers receive and this helps them to respond to the complexities of children's needs. Recruitment is gradually increasing in this stable fostering network.
33. The working relationship between the local authority and the regional adoption agency (Adopt London North) is strong. There is a comprehensive offer of support available to those who require it, including birth relatives and adopted adults, as well as adoptive parents and their children.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: outstanding

34. Care-experienced young people benefit from receiving exceptional support from skilled and caring personal advisers, known in Islington as young people's

advisers (YPAs). Care-experienced young people over the age of 21 continue to receive an opt-out, responsive and meaningful service up to the age of 25 and beyond if needed. YPAs go above and beyond to ensure that their young people get the right help and support when they need it, regardless of their age, such as taking a young person to an appointment each week and waiting outside for them. Young people access a wealth of practical services and impactful support, which enables them to achieve excellent outcomes.

35. Relationship-building starts well in advance of children reaching adulthood. Children are allocated a social worker in the independent futures service after they have completed their GCSEs, to minimise any disruption. Often, the child will not change worker at a specific age, so that relationships are not interrupted and a 'cliff edge' is avoided.
36. YPAs know their young people well and ensure that they get to know young people's families, friends and support networks. This knowledge increases YPAs' ability to support young people to navigate the different relationships in their lives.
37. Young people are supported to stay in touch with people who are important to them. Some young people have been able to re-establish their relationships with family members, due to changing circumstances, through the support of the lifelong links service.
38. Young people have stable and secure relationships with their YPA, who they can confide in when they are worried or need help. Young people are supported by staff to make progress towards independence at a pace that is right for them. YPAs are creative in how they support care leavers and make determined and sustained efforts to remain in contact with them, even when young people are resistant to help. YPAs encourage and celebrate young people's achievements and are ambitious for them.
39. The vibrant and established Children's Active Involvement Service (CAIS) is popular with young people. YPAs support young people to give their views about the quality of the service that they receive. This has helped young people to be instrumental in influencing key areas of development that they wish to improve. This participation has benefited many children in care and care-experienced young people. Young people are fully involved in the corporate parenting board and key decision-making forums. They are very actively involved in the recruitment and training process for staff, foster carers and corporate senior leaders.
40. Care-experienced young people access a wide variety of services which impact positively on their physical, emotional and mental health. The incredibly diverse and comprehensive provision of support services is embedded in the wider offer for young people, and they benefit from accessing these services when needed. For example, young people access counselling, cognitive behavioural therapy, therapeutic mentoring, 'grand mentoring' and other services, all of which help

them move forward positively with their lives. The challenge for the local authority is to replicate this excellent support when young people live a considerable distance from Islington, although suitable plans are in place to address this.

41. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people receive very strong support and guidance to access legal support and specialist healthcare provision.
42. The care leaver offer is accessible, ambitious and clearly understood. Pathway plans are co-created with young people, and they reflect each individual's hopes and aspirations, as well as providing clarity about meaningful goals to be achieved. Plans provide a realistic analysis of risk and the level of support and resources required. They are sensitively written with and to young people and provide a wealth of helpful information and practical tips that support young people, ensuring that sensitive information, for example around sexual health, is addressed. Young people are fully engaged in any key decisions which affect them.
43. YPAs are alert to care-experienced young people's changing circumstances and are responsive to circumstances of risk and harm. When needs increase or risks escalate, YPAs are proactive in increasing their levels of support and considering how risks can be minimised.
44. YPAs keep in touch regularly with those young people who are in custody. YPAs work effectively and collaboratively with young people and agencies to ensure that appropriate plans are in place to support young people when they return to their homes and communities.
45. All young people are very well supported and positively encouraged to engage in education, training or employment (EET). The youth employment service, other additional educational services and specialist workers support young people to follow their aspirations and engage in positive community education, employment and training activities. Young people are involved in many different leisure pursuits which they enjoy, including music, going to the gym and meeting up with friends.
46. The emotional and practical help that is offered to young people to help them prepare for adulthood is extensive and strongly embedded. The accredited independence programme, known as the House project, and the newly developed Next Steps programme, support young people to develop the essential skills needed to help them navigate the opportunities and challenges of adult life and secure their own tenancies. The House project and Next Steps groups have made a real difference to young people's lives. Young people really appreciate the 'moving in manual' that provides practical help, brought to life by YPAs, to help them find solutions to problems when they live alone. The success of this wraparound support has unquestionably contributed to there having been no tenancy breakdowns over the past two years. Those young people who identify as LGBTQ+ have been supported to seek specific help,

support and accommodation which help to them feel safe and secure. The successful collaboration between the housing department and children's services has increased the provision of appropriate housing options for care-experienced young people in Islington.

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

47. Senior leaders and politicians are relentless in their united approach to improve the lives of children and families in Islington. Strong and committed corporate and partner relationships ensure that safeguarding and lifelong corporate parenting responsibilities are given the highest of profiles, across the council and beyond.
48. Since the previous inspection, the quality of services to children has been robustly maintained or improved. The three areas identified for improvement at the previous inspection and subsequent focused visit have been prioritised and successfully addressed. Sustained investment in resources and services has continued and the robust collaboration with partners to focus on achieving shared priorities for children remains strong. There is an impressive array of support for children and families, not least the emotional and mental health provision for children and young people up to the age of 25 and the lifelong links team.
49. Senior leaders promote the mission of 'child-friendly' Islington and the priorities of corporate parenting, the child's voice, school attendance and EET activities. These priorities are the fundamental and consistent threads that run through children's services and services for youth justice, education and housing that enable children and families to flourish.
50. Care experienced has been made a protected characteristic, proposed by a young person to the council and unanimously supported. This is more than just words, with the chief executive officer, in her address to all council colleagues, making clear the corporate parenting culture and strategy in a mission to increase opportunities for care leavers. The focus is to increase training and work opportunities from the current 10 apprenticeships, and to respond to children and young people's stated priority for a safe place to call home.
51. Senior leaders and managers understand the impact of practice on children and families. Many of the key priorities for improvement are based on the local authority's accurate self-evaluation and their analysis of qualitative and quantitative data. Through different performance reporting mechanisms and scrutiny of audits, a range of appropriate and relevant recommendations have been made to improve practice and shape service development. An example of this is a recent change to the Adolescent Support Intervention Project, a team that delivers intensive support to children who are at risk of becoming looked after due to exploitation or concerns around serious youth violence. This team

now supports children in care, to help to secure their placements, as well as helping children to remain at home.

52. In addition to external peer reviews, there is considerable individual and themed auditing that gives senior leaders significant insight into practice. The large-scale themed biannual practice weeks are embraced by senior leaders, managers and practitioners alike. A wide range of live practice is observed during these practice weeks and the views of children, families and carers are sought to understand the impact of interventions. However, the local authority can improve its line of sight by seeking the views of children and parents when completing individual audits.
53. Leaders' and managers' curiosity and drive to understand need and improve interventions extend to the practice and outcomes board. Here, a wide range of performance reporting is considered and reviewed for all children, to support service planning and development. Leaders know who the vulnerable groups are and make it their business to understand from children and young people what their biggest worries are and what works for them. They know the challenge of providing suitable housing, and the challenges brought by the high levels of poverty in Islington. They continually work to break down these barriers and have recently significantly increased young people's housing provision through representation at the corporate parenting board, demonstrating strong, effective collaborative relationships with housing and other agencies. The House project, the Next Steps programme and all the work that surrounds them are impressive.
54. Islington's zero tolerance of the use of unregistered children's homes highlights the effectiveness of the local authority's arrangements and creative approach to sufficiency. Serious youth violence and children and care-experienced young people at risk of exploitation or going missing are significant issues in Islington. The response to this, and the specialist consultation and advice from the missing and exploitation team, in combination with youth justice services, are a real strength. Various diversionary services, multi-agency teams such as I-CAN, which aims to reduce group-related violence, and targeted youth services, alongside the local authority's adolescent and edge of care services, are effective in reducing the risks for many children and young people.
55. Social work practice is based on the principles of the local authority's trauma-informed practice model and is embedded in early years, children's services and education. The relationship-based practice in Islington with children, parents and carers makes a real difference to outcomes. Social workers and practitioners know how important it is to understand and celebrate children's identity, culture, diversity and uniqueness. Children benefit from positive relationships with often consistent social workers who spend quality time with them. Powerful direct work, rooted in social workers' ways of working, supports and informs care plans. Many children attend their review meetings and are supported to contribute.

56. Social workers are proud to be part of Islington; they are delighted about working in Islington and benefit from the reflective supervision that they receive. They appreciate and feel valued by managers and the visible senior leaders. Workforce stability figures reflect this positivity, and the local authority leads on the regional partnership programmes to address the continual challenge to increase permanent recruitment. The local authority pays close attention to social workers' and practitioners' psychological well-being, through the use of health checks and surveys. The local authority extends their practice model method of 'motivational interviewing' to their recruitment process, to ensure that applicants' values are aligned with those of the organisation.
57. Social workers and practitioners appreciate the professional development and support opportunities that they have beyond supervision. These include specialist enhanced consultations with CAMHS professionals and reflective individual and group discussions, as well as an array of resources and services that they can use to help to make a difference for children and families. The assessed and supported year in employment academy is well established. Staff take up a wide range of training opportunities, including management development courses such as the Black and Asian leadership initiative programme. Staff feedback to inspectors about training was very positive and this was reflected in post-training evaluation questionnaires.
58. Social workers value their consistently manageable caseloads, together with management support, which give them the space and time to plan their work and engage children and families in effective relationship-based direct work. This productive and sensitive work maximises the potential to achieve positive outcomes for children and their families.

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