

# London Borough of Barnet

## Inspection of children's social care services

**Inspection dates: 13 May to 24 May 2019**

**Lead inspector: Andy Whippey**  
**Her 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	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Services for children in Barnet are good, and much improved from the services that were found to be inadequate in 2017. Leaders and managers have made purposeful progress, at pace, to establish a child-focused service that is delivering good outcomes. The executive director and his team, together with strong corporate support, have ensured a focus on continuous improvement. This is underpinned by a clear oversight of practice and comprehensive knowledge of the service.

Strong partnerships have led to an effective and well-integrated early help service. Children who need help and protection now receive help and support that is timely and of good quality. Assessments and plans show careful consideration of the views of children and their families.

Children in care receive a good service from workers who know them well. Carers provide stable homes and are supportive and ambitious for the children in their care. Care leavers are mostly well supported and have access to a good range of suitable accommodation. Staff are tenacious and determined in working with young people to improve outcomes, which they do with care and sensitivity.

## What needs to improve

- The incorporation of actions from the vulnerable adolescents at risk panel (VARP) and exploitation strategy meetings into child in need and child protection plans.
- The updating of assessments of need when circumstances change for children in care.
- The incorporation of outcomes from multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARACs) into child in need and child protection plans.
- The promotion of advocacy support for children in care.

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

1. Children and their families benefit from a good early help offer and have access to a broad range of preventive and targeted services. Early help services are integrated into the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), resulting in timely decisions to identify the most appropriate help to meet children's needs. Partnership working across the early help hubs is strong, with a clear focus on considering the needs of children and their families. Parents and carers are very positive about the impact of services on the well-being of them and their children. While the views of children and families are well considered in early help assessments, the analysis of risk is less well articulated in a small number of cases.
2. Partners have a good understanding of thresholds when making referrals. Thresholds are applied consistently for children in need of help and protection. The 'front door' and the MASH provide a timely and effective response to contacts by professionals and members of the public. Contacts in the MASH are responded to quickly, according to the level of need and risk in the presenting information. Consent is routinely sought, or overridden when appropriate, and managers record a clear rationale for their decisions. When concerns for children escalate, multi-agency responses to information requests are managed effectively to ensure that work can be progressed in a timely way. For the majority of cases, partner information is thorough and contributes to the assessment of children's needs.
3. Children receive appropriate support and interventions from the out-of-hours emergency duty team, which is shared with another borough. Communication and handover arrangements with the MASH work well, ensuring an effective response to children and their families.
4. Timely strategy discussions take place when children's needs escalate. Discussions are child-focused, with good consideration of historical factors,

and decision-making is clear and appropriate. Strategy meetings are held routinely when young people are missing or are at risk of exploitation.

5. Staff take effective action to reduce risks to children who are considered to be highly vulnerable and at risk of exploitation, including children missing from home, school or care. Workers are tenacious in trying to engage young people who have been missing, making good use of return home interviews. Social workers understand the complexity of risks to children and this is given good consideration in multi-agency meetings and risk assessments. The monthly VARP enables good consideration of high-risk individual young people, to better understand the risks and protective factors. Disruptive measures to reduce risks of sexual and other forms of exploitation are clearly identified. The use of the sexual exploitation and missing (SEAM) tool helps to identify specific risks and vulnerabilities. However, some young people do not have an integrated plan that sufficiently incorporates all actions from SEAM and VARP in order to provide a comprehensive overview of risk that would enable clear oversight and evaluation of progress.
6. The vast majority of assessments are timely, comprehensive and of good quality. Children's and family's views, often gathered over a number of visits, are well evidenced and inform assessment outcomes. Assessments provide succinct evidence of risks to children and clear analysis. They demonstrate a good balance of understanding and analysis and are focused on parents' capacity to meet the needs of children. Workers make good use of chronologies and family history and show sensitive consideration of culture and ethnicity in their assessments, which results in a good understanding of individual children's needs.
7. Well-established and flexible services provide effective and sustained interventions for children and adults at risk from domestic abuse. Senior managers recognise that there is more to do to ensure that protective actions agreed at MARAC meetings are incorporated into children's plans to ensure a clear and integrated plan to help to protect children.
8. Most child protection and child in need plans are realistic and identify clear desired outcomes, making it easy for parents and children to understand any concerns. Plans are increasingly child focused, although this is not yet consistent across the whole service.
9. Records of core groups and child in need planning meetings are consistently evident on children's files, although not all meetings take place within identified timescales, particularly child in need meetings. Meetings mostly include good-quality and up-to-date information about children and their families and consider progress against plans. Family members are helpfully facilitated to attend, supported by sensitive and proactive use of interpreters when required.

10. Social workers know their children well. They visit children very regularly and see them alone. Increasing use is made of purposeful, individual work to help to understand children's experiences and to inform planning. In a minority of cases, records are not completed in a timely manner, which results in gaps in information on children's records.
11. Disabled children benefit from strong service provision. Workers in the disability service know their children and families well and demonstrate a good understanding of their complex needs. Support and short breaks packages are comprehensive. Transition planning is timely. Plans for children are thorough, progress is monitored, and concerns are escalated appropriately when new or emerging risks are identified.
12. The number of children who are electively home educated has increased over the last two years. Senior managers have taken appropriate steps to identify children not receiving a suitable education, and liaise with partners when additional needs, including safeguarding concerns, are identified. Staff are tenacious in tracking any children missing education and make appropriate checks to establish their whereabouts.
13. Although the number of children and young people known to be at risk of radicalisation is relatively low, a clear process helps to ensure that they are protected.
14. Children living in private fostering arrangements are safeguarded effectively. They are visited regularly and are seen alone. Assessments of need are up to date, and children are given the opportunity to talk about any concerns or worries they may have about living away from their families.
15. Allegations against professionals are dealt with thoroughly and swiftly by the designated officer. Effective and well-established links with partner agencies are in place and allegations are progressed in a sensitive and timely way.
16. Strong partnerships and a clear homelessness protocol between Barnet housing and children's social care help to support 16- and 17-year-old young people in need of help and accommodation. Joint assessments and co-location of housing, early help and MASH workers support family mediation and shared communication about young people's risks and current circumstances that lead to appropriate responses to meet their needs.

## **The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: Good**

17. The quality of services for children in care has improved since the inspection in 2017. Social workers and managers are aspirational for the children in their care and demonstrate a determination to improve children's experiences and outcomes.

18. When children come into care, they receive effective and sensitive intervention. This includes unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, who receive a strong, supportive and quick response to meet their needs.
19. When risks increase and children are no longer able to live safely at home, statutory powers are used appropriately to safeguard and protect them. The pre-proceedings phase of the Public Law Outline is used well, and realistic timescales are set for parents to demonstrate progress. Plans are regularly reviewed to avoid drift. Effective support is in place, which reduces risk for children when parents are engaging well, but decisive action is taken when there is a failure to improve within a child's timescales. Thresholds for care proceedings are applied correctly, assessments and statements are mostly of good quality and plans are clear.
20. In most cases, children's needs for permanence are considered at the earliest opportunity. Whenever possible, children are looked after within their extended families. Assessments of connected persons are timely and comprehensive, identifying how the longer-term needs of children will be met. Support packages are creative and effective. Children who return home from care receive a good level of structured support for as long as they need it, and they only return home when it is appropriate and safe for them to do so.
21. Adoption is routinely considered, including 'foster to adopt' for those children unable to live with their birth or extended families. Recruitment processes for adopters are thorough and the assessment, training and support for adopters are sound. Good quality assessments inform considered decisions about whether brothers or sisters should live together. Carefully considered introductions prepare adopters and children well and ensure a smooth transition for children as they move from foster care to live with their adoptive parents. Most adoptions are completed without unnecessary delay.
22. Assessments for children placed with family members under special guardianship arrangements are timely and comprehensively explore the motivation and ability of carers to meet the needs of children until maturity. Support packages are tailored to the individual needs of carers and children.
23. Social workers know their children well and genuinely care about them. Children are seen regularly, routinely alone and the direct work undertaken with them is clearly taken into account in plans. Children are actively encouraged to take part in their reviews, although the number of children accessing advocacy is low and more needs to be done to promote the service.
24. The majority of children's care plans are clear, focused on the key areas of need for children and include realistic actions and timescales. However, updated assessments of need to inform plans for children with complex needs or when their circumstances have significantly changed are not routinely

undertaken, limiting the effectiveness of the plan. Children's needs for contact with family members and others important to them are well considered. In most cases, oversight of children's progress by independent reviewing officers (IROs) is good and is recorded in children's records. Statutory reviews are held regularly, with increasing use of mid-point reviews. IROs are appropriately challenging and escalate concerns when necessary, which has resulted in better planning for children.

25. Social workers recognise and respond well to children in care who are vulnerable to exploitation. This includes identifying interdependencies of risks from sexual exploitation, missing from care, radicalisation and criminal exploitation. Strategy meetings result in appropriate plans that help to reduce risk and protect children.
26. Children's physical and emotional health needs are well understood and met. Health assessments are up to date and timely and address known health histories. They identify all health needs and are actively followed up to ensure that these needs are met. Strengths and difficulties questionnaires inform assessments of children's emotional health, with additional support available from relevant clinicians and in-house specialists to enable carers to care for children with complex needs and histories.
27. The virtual school provides effective support for the progress and attainment of children in care. The virtual school team has a sound understanding of the progress that children are making. As a result of effective support, many make good progress from their starting points. Personal education plans are mostly of good quality; they are reviewed termly and clearly identify the support that children need. Interventions are tailored to children's needs and support their progress well.
28. Children receive good-quality care from their foster carers. Most in-house foster carers are recruited, assessed and approved within appropriate timescales. Assessments are thorough and demonstrate consideration of the impact of fostering on the whole family. Foster carers benefit from a wide range of support and training opportunities, and carers report being well supported.
29. A small number of children have experienced too many placement moves before a long-term match with suitable carers is made. Increasing use is made of early placement stability meetings when there is a danger of disruption, with specific support given to both carers and children. This is beginning to have a positive impact.
30. Children have access to a range of leisure opportunities, through after-school activities, sport and music, and they are able to have sleepovers with their friends where appropriate. Foster carers exercise their delegated authority effectively in the best interests of children.

31. Very few children and young people have support from an independent visitor. The service has been recommissioned recently, with an increased recruitment target, but this is yet to have an impact.
32. Children in care placed outside of the local authority are well supported and have appropriate access to relevant health and education provision. If children are placed out of borough, this is often in response to a safeguarding or complex need, and active consideration is given to children returning to a local placement when this is consistent with their needs. Appropriate notifications are made to host authorities.
33. Most care leavers receive a positive level of support. The quality of pathway plans is variable and not all pathway plans are reviewed when young people's circumstances significantly change. Better pathway plans were seen using the recently launched 'All about me' format, which contains greater clarity about young people's views and aspirations and a more thorough assessment of their circumstances.
34. Care leavers are in suitable accommodation, and there is good use of staying put arrangements, including for young adults in their twenties. The majority of care leavers are in education, employment or training and there is a good focus on engaging young people in such activities by their personal advisers. Senior managers have been proactive in developing opportunities for care leavers through the creation of a number of apprenticeships. Personal advisers are proactive and genuinely interested in the young people, who value the support that they receive.
35. The multi-agency high-risk case forum for care leavers is well supported by partner agencies and explores creative ways to engage vulnerable young people with multi-agency services. Clear actions are agreed for each young person, with a timescale for review; this helps to ensure that the risks are understood and appropriate plans to support young people are put in place.
36. Care leavers receive copies of their health histories. However, senior managers recognise that there is more work to do in conjunction with young people to ensure that these documents contain all the relevant information for the young people to make informed decisions about their health.

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

37. Leaders and managers have made significant progress in improving the quality of children's services since the previous inspection in 2017. Their determination to strive constantly for improvement and their openness to learning have driven change at pace. This has been supported by the positive

input of the improvement board. Strong and effective leadership at a political level and throughout the council has prioritised support and care for children and young people. This has led to significant and tangible improvements in the quality of social work practice and the services that children and young people experience. Time and energy have been invested in ensuring that political leaders and members understand the importance of children's social care. This deeper understanding has enabled more robust scrutiny and challenge.

38. Senior managers know the quality of frontline practice well, including the strengths and areas requiring further improvement. This knowledge is gained through relevant performance information and enhanced by shadowing workers, observing practice, chairing panels and engaging directly with young people. Sound decisions ensure that children receive the right level of support when they first need it. The local authority's stated ethos and belief that children's needs are best met at the earliest opportunity and, whenever possible, within their wider family, are evidenced by its firm commitment to funding early help provision and a raft of edge of care provision.
39. Senior leaders have developed mature relationships with partner agencies, supported by robust oversight by the Barnet Safeguarding Children Board and its sub groups. A wide range of partners, including the police and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), all commented positively to inspectors on the level of progress made to further safeguard children.
40. Senior managers have a detailed knowledge of their services and the local community. The challenges in placement sufficiency, based on a clear analysis of need, are well known and reflected in the sufficiency strategy. Managers recognise the necessity for a more diverse range of carers to meet the needs of the profile of children and young people in care in Barnet. While inspectors saw a number of young people who were appropriately placed out of authority to address safeguarding concerns, senior managers recognise the need for more local provision to reduce the number of children placed out of borough or at a distance.
41. Since the previous inspection in 2017, leaders and senior managers have embraced their role as corporate parents and have applied vigour in progressing an action plan to improve the lives of children in care and care leavers. A clear line of accountability and an established infrastructure of meetings and panels demonstrate momentum in improving services and practice to children in care and care leavers. Young people's views are sought and their involvement in shaping services is sensitively facilitated.
42. There is a clear and established system of audits underpinning the quality assurance process. Audit findings are collated into quality assurance reports that highlight strengths and areas for development and next steps. Audits



have rightly had a focus on compliance in the local authority's improvement journey. More recent audits have moved to a fuller consideration of the impact of work on outcomes for children, although the approach is at an early stage and needs to be further embedded. Trends and themes from audits are used effectively to inform the training and development programme. Actions arising from audits are identified, with routine follow up to ensure that they are completed. Social workers are appropriately involved in the completion of audits to help their understanding of what constitutes good practice.

43. Performance management systems capture a wide range of relevant data across the organisation. This data not only provides senior managers with aggregated data across the service but also provides team level data, which enables team and service managers to identify any performance shortfalls emerging in their area of responsibility, and to respond accordingly. The use of performance data is increasingly embedded and accessible. Improved accountability by managers at all levels means that there is analysis and challenge and helps to ensure that issues are tackled as they arise.
44. Staff have manageable caseloads and senior managers have worked hard to ensure that social workers maintain a consistent relationship with children. While supervision of frontline practice is not always consistently recorded in children's records, the majority of work with children receives effective frontline management oversight.
45. Staff are both tenacious and thoughtful in their work, showing a strong commitment to the delivery of good services to children. Inspectors saw examples where workers went the extra mile to ensure that vulnerable children are supported well in whatever circumstances they find themselves. Staff feel supported and report that managers and leaders are easily accessible and approachable. Social workers appreciate the opportunity to continually develop and progress in their careers and are supported to do so. Senior managers recognise the importance of an effective workforce strategy to ensure consistency both of management oversight and the opportunity for children to build meaningful relationships with social workers. The workforce strategy is starting to have an impact on increasing the numbers of permanent workers, which helps to ensure that children have fewer changes of social worker. Workers in their assessed and supported year in employment are allocated cases of increasing complexity, which helps to develop their confidence and competence in relationship-based social work.



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