

# Inspection of Westminster local authority children's services

**Inspection dates:** 11 to 15 November 2024

**Lead inspector:** Naintara Khosla, 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

Since the last inspection, in 2019, Westminster Council has continued to strengthen and enhance practice to deliver excellent services to children and families. With strong, ambitious political and corporate support, inspirational, child-centred and family-focused senior leaders and exceptional managers and staff relentlessly focus on improving children's lives.

Politicians and senior leaders regularly and meaningfully engage with children, families and partners, ensuring that their views shape services. A strong performance management infrastructure and a mature and extensive audit programme enable leaders to understand children's experiences, while continuously striving to do better.

Sustained investment has helped to create highly effective, impressive early help services, helping children and achieving change in many families without the need for escalation into statutory social work. Experienced, knowledgeable practitioners throughout children's services are assisted in their work by highly developed local safeguarding partnership arrangements that provide much scrutiny and a visionary, innovative approach to improving practice for children. Children in care and care leavers benefit from outstanding support and exceptional learning opportunities.

## What needs to improve?

- The consistency of response to children's experiences from the local authority designated officer (LADO) service.

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

1. A wide range of specialist and targeted early help services intervene at the right time to improve children's circumstances. Skilled, insightful and reflective early help practitioners work collaboratively to explore the role of parents, including fathers and wider family members. Ethnicity and diversity information is sought at the earliest opportunity, and families' cultural heritage, religion and identity needs are embedded routinely into assessments, giving practitioners insight and context to better help parents and children.
2. When need and risks escalate, children can quickly access statutory social work services. Referrals from partner agencies are strong, include appropriate information and are progressed swiftly. When further information is necessary, multi-agency arrangements support effective information-sharing. Parental consent is explicitly acquired and recorded. There is a shared multi-agency understanding of consent, and practitioners understand when consent should be dispensed with.
3. Knowledgeable, confident managers have a clear understanding of children's circumstances. They assess risk and prioritise contacts and referrals accurately. They record the rationale for their decisions in children's records, so that next steps are clearly set out. Responses to risk are consistently appropriate and effective.
4. Westminster emergency duty service operates jointly with two neighbouring boroughs. This service provides an effective and timely response to children and families out of office hours and at the weekends. The interface with day services is strong.
5. Families and children experiencing domestic abuse have access to a wide range of effective specialist services. Practice in response to domestic abuse is culturally competent, taking account of individual diversity and victims' religious needs. For example, families have support from workers of the same cultural background. High-quality training, advice and consultation, and a wide range of support, including from clinical specialists and an independent voluntary domestic abuse advocate, help workers intervene confidently and effectively in a way that supports whole families.
6. The multi-agency risk assessment conference process is appropriately directing multi-agency resources to victims and children at highest risk. Although the extent of direct work with children varies, good cooperation and a shared understanding of the impact for children underpin the response to domestic

abuse. Perpetrators are assisted to attend programmes to address their behaviour and their children's experiences are better understood and risks reduce.

7. Child protection strategy meetings are promptly convened when they are needed to prioritise responses to the most vulnerable children. They include key partners and lead to highly effective safety planning and decision-making for children. A small number of child protection strategy meetings do not include health partners to share full information about children's needs. However, child protection enquiries are thorough, they include health and other multi-agency information, and they quickly lead to help that reduces harm to children. Children's wishes and views are sought and incorporated into assessments.
8. Children's assessments are comprehensive and analytical and include a clear rationale for decision-making. Social workers assess the impact of previous history, include family network information, conceptualise current risks and sensitively record information to share with families.
9. Regular, purposeful visits, in line with children's needs, help practitioners contextualise children's experiences, intervene and make a difference. Extensive engagement with wider family members and other important adults is crucial to reducing risks and improving situations for children.
10. Social workers engage in meaningful activities and creative direct work to help children share their worries and wishes and gain insights into what daily life is like for them. This helps them to formulate plans with families that make children safer.
11. Disabled children receive strong, timely assessments of their needs. The consistent use of advocates for parents and children helps to ensure that assessments are collaborative and informed by their wishes. Disabled children's plans are comprehensive and focus on their needs. Care packages are provided to alleviate parenting pressures. Effective management oversight ensures that resources and family engagement remain in place when children are transitioning to support from adult services.
12. Children who are young carers are supported well, with coordinated multi-agency help improving children's welfare and their attendance and progress at school.
13. Most initial child protection conferences are timely. Conferences are well attended by relevant partner agencies. Decisions are informed by detailed mapping reports, which evaluate the progress of child protection plans and recommend actions to reduce risks for children. Management oversight provides an added layer of scrutiny and a rationale for decision-making.
14. Children who are subject to child-in-need and child protection plans make good progress as workers meticulously focus on their needs and improving their lived experiences. A comprehensive range of therapeutic and parenting services is

available to meet the needs of children from diverse communities. These include, for example, a programme that is strengthening fathers' engagement, a therapeutic intervention to end domestic abuse in families, and intensive support from a team of practitioners trained in systemic family therapy. Services coalesce to provide exceptionally impactful services for parents and children. This ensures the right help to address the issues, including timely parental assessments for court proceedings.

15. For those children supported through pre-proceedings within the Public Law Outline, work is progressed appropriately and proceedings are issued when necessary. Early planning for unborn babies is a particular strength; workers support parents' understanding of concerns and tailor their approach to their learning needs. Pre-proceedings letters are written sensitively and with thought about the impact the contents may have on families. For a small number of families, letters contain too much professional language, making it harder for them to understand concerns.
16. The LADO service provides wider training and awareness-raising to inform professionals across sectors and in the local community. The LADO service provides an appropriate and well-considered response to concerns about adults who potentially pose a risk of harm to children. While children's needs are considered, the decision-making and response to children's welfare needs are not always clarified with the 'front door' or evidenced on children's records. This is a missed opportunity in some cases to identify need and offer support and services to vulnerable children.
17. The multi-agency response to children who are at risk of exploitation and going missing is effective. Social workers ensure that risks to children, whether they go missing from home or care, are understood well and lead to appropriate plans and interventions that prioritise their safety and reduce risk. When risks escalate, child protection strategy and legal planning meetings help workers respond effectively to prevent harm. Skilled and dedicated leads for missing and exploitation provide additional expertise and direction for social workers, so that help for children being exploited is regularly reviewed and intervention relentlessly focuses on reducing risks.
18. Children are routinely offered and take up return home interviews with their social workers. These interviews help workers understand push-and-pull factors and inform actions to address contextual risks.
19. Children who are 16 and 17 years old and at risk of homelessness receive a timely, child-centred service. Workers give children information about their rights and entitlements so they can make an informed decision about becoming looked after. Social work intervention continues to help children who chose not to become looked after.
20. Westminster education team has strong and effective systems to monitor children at risk of missing education and those children who are electively home

educated. Vulnerable children's attendance is closely reviewed so that early action can be taken. For example, additional multi-agency collaboration and assessments enable children with emotionally related school avoidance to return to school.

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

21. The quality and impact of practice for children in care has been further enhanced since the last ILACS inspection, in 2019.
22. Children in Westminster come into care when it is necessary and in their best interests to do so, with prompt and carefully considered management decision-making. Placement meetings, children in care reviews and initial health assessments are timely and clear plans support children to build strong relationships with their carers.
23. There is an unwavering focus on children staying in their wider families, whenever this is possible and in their best interests. This goal is supported well through family group conferencing and good use of genograms that inform thorough assessments. Families are assisted in providing continuity of care and permanence through appropriate legal frameworks. There is an offer of exceptional support and access to therapeutic services; this is set out comprehensively in children's support plans.
24. Children's stability is a priority, and their needs are met with exceptionally strong senior management oversight of permanence planning. Social workers and systemic clinicians work together to complete thorough parenting assessments, incorporating extended family networks to promote successful kinship arrangements and, when appropriate, reunification with parents. When children are unable to return to their families, contingency plans are considered promptly and set out in children's records.
25. Children's needs, including those of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, are well understood. Children live in homes where their needs are met exceptionally well. Children experience stability where they live. Support is readily available from a range of therapeutic services, helping to sustain children's emotional well-being and provide security and permanence in their homes. Family time is considered alongside important wider relationships, so that children's stories are informed by links with historic relationships that help them better understand their identity and cultural origins. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are supported to seek family members in the UK and are helped to see them and build relationships.
26. Children in care, including unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, are supported to keep links within their communities. Workers and carers encourage them to attend relevant religious settings, such as mosques, and to participate in a range of activities and hobbies, such as cadets, gyms and martial arts classes.

27. Transition to adult services occurs smoothly for children with additional needs and for disabled children. Children's needs are met well by health, education and adult social care professionals who contribute to regular reviews. Detailed assessments, aligned with resources, inform children's plans and the support provided in order to help them steadily progress into adulthood.
28. Independent reviewing officers (IRO) visit and consult children regularly to seek their wishes. Children's voices are reflected in IRO reports and review minutes. Children have trusting relationships with consistent social workers, who visit in line with their needs. Children's social work visits are comprehensively recorded and demonstrate meaningful communication to understand children's experiences.
29. For all children, including unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and those placed in and out of the borough, placement moves are carefully planned at the child's pace, with therapeutic support in place throughout the process.
30. Looked after children are supported well to achieve in education and make progress from their starting points. Personal education plans are timely and detailed. They routinely capture the voice of the child and comments from other professionals. Carers add positively to a detailed picture of what is going on in the child's life and their educational needs. Schools and colleges feel both supported and appropriately challenged to improve educational outcomes for Westminster's children in care. Additional investment reflects ambition and aspiration for all children, recognising the need for alternative pathways, for example to include vocational options.
31. Children who can benefit from adoption are placed with potential adoptive carers at the earliest opportunity. This is often helped by potential adoptive carers also being approved as foster carers. Children have the right homes to meet their needs. Social workers carefully consider their identity, culture and heritage, with additional exploration of children's needs through agency adviser scrutiny.
32. Beautifully crafted life-story work and later life letters provide children and adopters with a wealth of information to help children understand their history and why decisions were made on their behalf when they were younger.
33. The fostering service shows an exceptional commitment to supporting children and foster carers. Foster carers are overwhelmingly positive about the support they receive, in particular from their social workers. Effective oversight from the fostering panel and agency decision-maker, and a swift response to feedback, ensure the service is responsive and adaptive. As a result, children in foster care experience stability and a supportive environment in which to thrive.
34. Westminster is part of the regional adoption agency (RAA), (Coram Ambitious for Adoption). Effective collaboration between social workers and the RAA ensures prompt family finding, helping Westminster children move quickly into

stable, loving homes. Adoptive families receive excellent support throughout the adoption process, including specialist therapeutic resources that strengthen parenting approaches and promote long-term stability. This well-coordinated approach enables children to thrive in a secure and nurturing environment with their new families.

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

35. Care leavers receive excellent support. Young people's relationships with their personal advisers (PAs) and social workers are a vital resource, helping them grow into adulthood. Practitioners access multi-agency and community resources in order to build support networks for young people who are vulnerable. Consistently strong oversight and guidance by managers supports confident, creative practice with young people and helps workers to manage risk well. Very effective and skilful personal advisers build nurturing, warm relationships with young people, helping to encourage and motivate them through difficult times.
36. Care leavers have frequent, meaningful contact with their personal advisers, who have high aspirations and are great advocates for them. Young people know how they can access the supports and resources that they are entitled to. They live in suitable accommodation and most are happy and settled. They are appropriately prepared for and supported into independence and helped to access training, employment and education. Young people are ambitious and keen to make the best of all the opportunities available to them.
37. Care leavers over 21 years are actively encouraged to continue their relationship with their personal adviser. Relationships remain strong, with regular visits and effective pathway planning focused on any areas of continuing need.
38. Care leavers access their health information through the NHS app. They are helped to gain skills to move towards independent living when this is appropriate. Personal advisers understand the importance of care leavers' wider networks. They support them well to build positive networks with family, friends and professionals. When necessary, they ensure that young people are well prepared for transition to adult services.
39. Vulnerable care leavers, including young people with mental health needs, receive particularly good support, and they make progress. Personal advisers are alert to mental health difficulties. They work persistently to motivate young people and work proactively with other services to address their needs. Care leavers placed outside the borough are linked in with local services in the areas where they live, as well as having ongoing support and oversight from their personal advisers. Systemic clinicians offer input to care leavers face-to-face and remotely, to support understanding of their emotional health needs and help them develop strategies to manage their feelings.

40. Care leavers are aware of and are accessing the comprehensive local offer. They have the key documents they need for adulthood, including driving licences, passports, birth certificates and national insurance numbers.
41. Personal advisers and social workers ensure that pathway assessments reflect young people's ambitions and needs. Pathway plans are regularly reviewed and are respectfully written with and to the young person. Personal advisers ensure that care leavers' histories, progress and wider cultural and identity needs are understood and included in their plans, to provide an accurate understanding of need. Personal advisers know how to respond to those care leavers who wish to access their records, and they provide appropriate emotional support when needed.
42. Personal advisers support care leavers who are parents effectively. For these young parents, personal advisers are often the most significant trusted adult in their lives. Personal advisers are fierce advocates for those care leavers who have involvement with children's services relating to their children. They provide key support to them through challenging experiences, explaining what they need to achieve to safeguard their children and providing both practical and emotional support.
43. Care leavers who are in custody are also supported well. Workers visit them frequently in person, attending to their emotional and health needs, including their access to therapy and medication. Personal advisers and social workers are staunch advocates for these young people. They ensure that young people remain in close contact with family members and those who matter to them. They work closely with other relevant professionals to support young people and plan for their resettlement with appropriate accommodation.
44. The council celebrates and supports its care leavers' achievements. Personal advisers are ambitious for young people, providing support and encouragement and, when necessary, bespoke services to help them through challenges. Many care leavers, including former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, have made significant progress in their education and careers.

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

45. Since the last inspection, leaders have sustained outstanding services, which continue to meet the needs of a diverse population.
46. Through accurate self-assessment, council leaders have identified areas that need investment, responding to changes in demography and worsening economic circumstances for many families as a result of the cost of living crisis. Leaders respond creatively to increasingly complex work with children and families, ensuring that children progress and do well. The systemic social work practice model operates consistently and effectively in Westminster. The model



embraces a relational approach, with a demonstrable and explicit commitment to anti-racist practice, diversity and inclusion.

47. Well-informed, ambitious and passionate council leaders consciously put children at the heart of policy, with investment in community services such as family hubs and free school meals for all children, to help give them positive experiences at the earliest opportunity. In recognition of changing demographics, leaders have secured investment to strengthen provision for disabled children and to increase housing options for care leavers.
48. The chief executive uses the knowledge and expertise of children's social care service delivery and its leadership in other council departments. This ensures that a corporate parenting approach is securely embedded, with children's voices directly influencing policy and practice throughout council departments. Children have a voice in forums across the council. This is exemplified with their views being heard through the well-established Westminster Guardians Board, which is co-chaired with children. Leaders are always seeking to further develop their excellent services. The recent appointment of a participation worker is helping to further amplify children's voices.
49. Westminster leaders are outward-looking, seeking to provide sector-led improvement in collaboration with the Department for Education. Where it may be necessary, leaders seek to learn from other boroughs and organisations, so they are continually challenging their ways of working and seeking to do even better.
50. Relationships with key partners are strong and mature and are used to address disproportionality. For example, co-locating early intervention and health services has strengthened the focus on perinatal mental health support and helped disadvantaged families to access healthcare and other services.
51. Strategic leaders ensure that relationships with key partners, including the health community, the police, schools and colleges, the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) and the family court, provide an effective context for social workers and other professionals to work constructively with children and families. Multi-agency interventions reflect a trauma-informed approach and build systemic support around children and their families.
52. Effective investment and commissioning have ensured that a very good range of services are available for children, young people and families, both within the council and through the wider public and community sectors.
53. Planning and trackers are in place and overseen by capable and experienced managers so that children benefit from thoughtful and careful intervention. The impact of management oversight and planning is particularly evident in the strength of practice for unborn babies and in permanence planning for children who need care.

54. High-quality practice reflects a systemic social work approach. This has helped to create impactful systemic services that are continuously developing to respond to children's needs. Leaders have embedded a comprehensive and highly effective quality and performance management framework, using performance and audit information to understand the quality and impact of practice. Practice is considered in a wide range of forums, including the use of a comprehensive reflective audit practice tool and multi-agency audits for the local safeguarding partnership. These activities provide assurance and insight into the impact of practice with children, helping leaders and partners to further enhance the service response.
55. The stable and very experienced management team creates an open learning environment where **exceptional** workers are able to reflect, discuss and plan their work with children, gaining in expertise through the process. The experience and expertise of managers mean that practitioners are guided in their work and able to respond well to children's needs. Caseloads are carefully managed so that staff are able to undertake work with families competently, with time to build trusting relationships and successfully alleviate pressures for families. Leaders support workers to practise creatively with children, providing budgets for them to undertake activities.
56. Good workforce stability and manageable workloads allow children to have consistent and meaningful relationships with workers they trust. The efficacy of relational social work is evident in all areas of practice with children and young people. Feedback across the service from workers, families and care leavers endorses a culture of responsiveness, engagement and relational practice. Leaders' commitment to sustaining investment in systemic training is instrumental to the ethos and principles of practice with children and families. Even when interventions are challenging for them, families appreciate how sensitively workers engage with them to improve the lives of their children.
57. Social work practice is enhanced with in-house therapeutic services, including from the Intensive Support Team, systemic family therapy and child and adolescent mental health services. Through these high-quality services, families get the right help to address concerns for their children, including timely parental assessments for court proceedings.
58. Extensive manager oversight is evident throughout children's records, providing strong direction for staff and helping to progress children's plans. Social workers praise managers' readiness to offer advice and guidance on a daily basis, to help make the right decisions for children and young people. Practice is supported by regular supervision, reflective practice discussion and access to consultation with a range of professionals and clinical specialists.
59. Practitioners experience a rewarding, positive and collaborative culture, with available, reflective managers who make sound decisions. Workers are able to support families through a wide range of resources, services and information.

This results in families and children's needs being met and appropriate help offered.

60. Anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice is central to work undertaken with children and families. Reflections in supervision explore the impact for children and families of discrimination, inequality, power imbalance and racism, to ensure that their experiences are better understood.
61. Staff enjoy and are proud to work in Westminster. They greatly value the supportive environment that leaders and managers have created with them. Of those who leave to work elsewhere, many return as they appreciate the borough, its diverse population and the excellent training opportunities they have to develop their practice. Group supervision and individual reflective practice are aided by a systemic clinician. Workers continue their professional journey, developing skills and knowledge in working with children and families, allowing social work practice to really flourish.

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