

# Inspection of Harrow local authority children's services

**Inspection dates:** 20 to 24 January 2025

**Lead inspector:** Rebekah Tucker, His Majesty's Inspector

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

Since the last inspection of Harrow in February 2020, when services for children were judged to be good, improvements have been made to some areas of practice. However, since 2020, significant leadership churn, including four directors of children's services (DCS) and two chief executives, has contributed to a deterioration in the quality of service and practice for care leavers. The current permanent DCS has been in post since August 2023 and is supported by an interim senior leadership team.

Following the joint targeted area inspection (JTAI) in May 2023, when areas for priority action were identified for prevention and early intervention, practice shortfalls have been mostly addressed effectively. There has been a concerted focus on the 'front door', supported by a revised early help strategy and a threshold review with partners. This strategic and operational focus on prevention and early intervention has, however, not extended to services for care leavers in Harrow. Until this inspection, senior leaders had not recognised the extent of improvement required to these services. In addition, children aged 16 and 17 who are homeless do not receive the services necessary to support their well-being. Management oversight and challenge are not fully embedded across all service areas. There is not currently sufficient leadership stability or focus to lead the level of change required.

## What needs to improve?<sup>1</sup>

- Leadership stability and capacity to lead the improvements required, including oversight of performance to ensure that there is a coherent and consistent response to the need for continuous improvement (Enabler two).
- The quality of support, advice and guidance for care leavers, including those with additional vulnerabilities or who need support up to the age of 25, to ensure that this is timely, consistent and responsive to levels of need (Outcome four).
- The identification of, and response to, risks to care leavers' welfare (Outcome three).
- The quality and accessibility of pathway plans for care leavers (Enabler two).
- The quality of help and support for children aged 16 and 17 years who present as homeless (Outcome three).
- The quality and consistency in the response to care leavers who go missing (Outcome three).
- The consistency of staffing for children and young people (Enabler two).
- The quality of supervision and management oversight of social workers and PAs, so that children and care leavers receive a timely and consistent service that is responsive to their needs (Enabler two).

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

1. Contacts and referrals into the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) are dealt with in a timely way and are prioritised in line with risk and need. Experienced and knowledgeable practitioners in the MASH undertake thorough screening, where family history is carefully evaluated alongside the views of parents and children. Thresholds are mostly understood and appropriately applied, so that most children receive the right level of support and intervention.
2. Children and families in Harrow benefit from a comprehensive range of early help services. Although there is some variability in the application of thresholds for early help, most children receive the right help at the right time, with some minor delays to allocation in a few children's cases. Most children who are referred to early help receive effective support from experienced and knowledgeable practitioners. Thorough, multi-agency early help assessments

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<sup>1</sup> The areas for improvement have been cross-referenced with the outcomes, enablers or principles in the [Children's Social Care: National Framework](#). This statutory guidance sets out the purpose, principles for practice and expected outcomes of children's social care.

are resulting in effective and positive change for children and families, although plans are not consistently timebound.

3. The response to domestic abuse referrals is well embedded in the MASH. Children and adults who are victims of domestic abuse receive sensitive support that mitigates risk, using the support of the independent domestic violence adviser. Social workers obtain information from key agencies, which leads to clear analysis of risk to inform the immediate and ongoing safety planning for most children. There is a careful use of language and a comprehensive understanding of coercion, control and fear-based behaviour.
4. The initial response to children at risk of significant harm is prompt. Children are transferred without delay to the first response service. Child protection strategy meetings are attended by relevant partner agencies. Multi-agency decisions made at strategy discussions are detailed and appropriately focused on children's safety.
5. Child protection enquiries build on the information shared in strategy meetings. Social workers visit children, see them alone and gather their views, using direct work to inform next steps. When needed, initial child protection conferences are convened without delay, resulting in the identification of plans reflective of children's needs and risks.
6. The out-of-hours service (EDT) responds effectively to urgent issues. Social workers visit families when required and ensure that protective arrangements are in place for children until the next working day. Effective communication between the social workers in EDT and daytime services ensures well-coordinated support to children and families.
7. Children's assessments are thorough, detailing their lived experience and providing an understanding of need and risk to inform subsequent planning. Direct work with children and families helps practitioners to understand the impact of cumulative harm and gather information from parents, including any absent parent. The cultural and religious needs of children and families are considered with sensitivity.
8. Children in need benefit from plans that make clear what needs to change and why. This means that children and families understand what is expected of them and why social workers are involved in their lives. Effective use is made of family group decision-making. Most plans are carefully considered and take account of children's needs well. Review meetings are well attended, and information is shared to measure progress and to agree next steps. Most plans for children in need benefit from effective management oversight with timely checkpoints, reducing delay.
9. Children who are subject to child protection planning receive a well-coordinated multi-agency response. Most plans are thorough and focused and reflect up-to-date assessment, adapting to changes in need and risk. Most plans are

monitored through timebound actions, and they are reviewed in regular, well-attended multi-agency core group meetings. Many families make identifiable progress as a result of child protection planning. Most child protection plans do not have clear contingency plans. Consequently, there is a risk that professionals and parents are unclear about what will happen if the plan is not followed.

10. Social workers visit children regularly. Children receive a sensitive approach from their social workers, which enables them to develop positive relationships with their practitioners. Children's voices are captured well through creative direct work that informs subsequent planning.
11. A very small number of children have been subject to re-referrals and repeat child protection plans. For these children, multiple changes in social worker have brought about delays in accessing meaningful support and making progress through plans. Overly optimistic practice, where practitioners do not identify patterns or long-standing cumulative forms of harm, has led to 'start again' interventions, when the needs of children escalate again.
12. For most children, when risks increase, there is timely escalation into the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline (PLO). Letters before proceedings are of variable quality, with some inconsistencies in clarity about what the concerns are, and what needs to change. Careful monitoring ensures that most children are successfully diverted away from the need for court action, and when proceedings are needed, they are issued without delay. As a result, most children's experiences and outcomes improve. Plans have drifted for a small number of children in pre-proceedings. Changes in social worker and operational and strategic managers in the service have contributed to this drift.
13. Flexible and effective edge of care support is provided by the keeping families together coaches, who work directly with parents and their children. The workers provide mediation and negotiation support to children and families in crisis.
14. Children who go missing or are at risk of exploitation are recognised and responded to effectively. The response to these children has improved since the last inspection. For these children, the multidisciplinary adolescent safeguarding team is a valuable resource. Creative and persistent work is undertaken by committed staff to engage highly vulnerable children. Daily missing meetings and data aid understanding of themes and behavioural patterns for children. Recordings of return home interviews evidence sensitive, detailed and curious conversations with children, seeking to fully explore the push/pull factors and danger signs. Monthly multi-agency child exploitation (MACE) meetings, while providing oversight and scrutiny of vulnerable children, result in plans that are not always timebound or far-reaching enough for children. Senior leaders have rightly identified this as an area for further improvement in their strategic priorities.

15. Disabled children benefit from skilled social workers who know them very well and understand their complex health needs. The workers recognise children's strengths and uniqueness and advocate strongly on their behalf. Children have effective support and safety plans, informed by a multidisciplinary team and timely review.
16. The responses to 16- and 17-year-olds in need of accommodation are inconsistent. For some children facing imminent homelessness, workers are too slow in assessing risk and ensuring that they have a suitable safety plan in place. While social workers told inspectors that they do verbally inform children of their rights, this is not recorded on their records. Children do not receive any written information about routes into housing or care in accordance with their assessed needs. Leaders acknowledged the need to strengthen positive decision-making about this vulnerable group of children among its staff and took immediate action during the inspection.
17. Social work assessments of children in private fostering arrangements are thorough and timely. Children are well supported by social workers, who ensure that their health, education and emotional needs are met.
18. The Harrow young carers service offers a comprehensive range of support to children. This is underpinned by effective multi-agency work to improve the identification, assessment and support that they receive.
19. The local authority designated officer (LADO) service provides a thorough response when there are allegations made against adults working with children. Allegations against professionals are swiftly and robustly managed.
20. There are effective systems in place to locate and monitor children who are missing education or who are electively home educated. Procedures for gathering information, risk-assessing, and providing ongoing support, advice and monitoring for families are effective.

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

21. When children come into care, they make tangible and sustained progress. Children live in settled and stable living arrangements, where their carers understand and meet their needs very well.
22. While most decisions to bring children into care are appropriate, there is some variability in their timeliness for a small number of children. In most cases, purposeful social work intervention improves children's situations and reduces the need for care. Active consideration is given as to whether they can remain living in their family network. For a very small number of children, parents were seen to have been misinformed about their parental responsibility when voluntary care arrangements were put in place, and fathers were not always consulted as part of the process. Leaders took immediate steps during this inspection to review this practice for children and their families. For most

children, permanence planning is progressed in an effective, timely manner without delay, with records that capture their life stories well.

23. Care planning is effective and timely, informed by children's voices and up-to-date assessments. Assessments are child-focused and reflective of children's developing needs. Children's identity and cultural needs are very well considered. Children's plans are reviewed effectively at meetings, which are well attended by parents, professionals and children, who receive support from advocates. Independent reviewing officers provide detailed oversight and constructive challenge. Children's needs are well understood by the team around the child and children receive tailored support.
24. Early permanence is considered effectively for most children. For a small number of children, fostering to adopt options are not always reviewed at the earliest opportunity. This means that some babies experience multiple moves and broken attachments before they are placed with their 'forever' families. Once early permanence is considered, plans are executed swiftly to ensure that babies are well matched and placed with their fostering to adopt carers without further delay. Most children have legal orders that are sought promptly to reduce the risk of drift and delay, with good consideration of special guardianship and kinship arrangements, where this meets children's needs.
25. When children are placed with their parents, clear assessments are completed where the risks are fully considered and, when required, mitigating arrangements are put in place. Increased visiting patterns and commissioned services support families well to care for the children in their home.
26. Social workers told inspectors that their high caseloads are hindering them from building meaningful relationships with children and being able to do everything children in care need them to do. This sentiment was echoed by children who met with inspectors. Some children have experienced several changes of social worker. This means that not all children in care have the quality of relationship with their social worker that they need. Despite these pressures, social workers take the time to visit children in care and get to know them well. Social workers undertake highly skilled life-story work and later life letters to help children to make sense of their journey into care.
27. The achievements of children in care are recognised by the local authority through an annual awards ceremony, and the participation officer engages effectively with children and care leavers through events and activities.
28. Most unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who arrive in Harrow are well supported and live in homes that meet their needs. Experienced social workers ensure that unaccompanied asylum-seeking children have their cultural, linguistic and religious needs well met.
29. The local authority makes very stringent efforts to avoid the use of unregistered provision, through robust senior leadership oversight and effective

communication with commissioners. At the time of the inspection, no such placements were in use.

30. Children in care have their ongoing health needs very well met. Healthcare plans provide clarity for carers and workers as to how children's health needs will be best met. Social workers coordinate timely access to universal health services and follow up referrals for any specialist services needed.
31. Staff working as part of the virtual school know children well. Most children are making strong academic progress from often very low starting points. Personal education plans (PEPs) are of good quality and are completed in a timely fashion. Many children benefit from bespoke and exciting enrichment activities.
32. Foster carers feel supported and benefit from having stable and long-standing managers and supervising social workers. The core tasks of assessment and supervision are completed well to support foster carers to care safely for children and help them to progress. A lack of sufficiently strong oversight to support foster carers to undertake the required training, and tighter arrangements around parent and child arrangements, is holding back the local authority's ability to further strengthen and improve the service.
33. The working relationship between the local authority and the regional adoption agency (Coram Ambition for Adoption) is well established. Liaison between the agencies at a strategic and operational level is effective in supporting children's plans for adoption. A robust package of assessment, support and training for adopters is available.

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

34. Since the inspection in 2020, the quality of support provided to care leavers has deteriorated and is now inadequate. The risk of harm to care leavers is not always recognised or responded to effectively. There are serious failures in keeping in touch with some care leavers. A significant number of care leavers have been inappropriately closed to the service, including those aged 18 to 21, when they are entitled to support and ongoing help. Care leavers are not reminded of their rights to access ongoing support through regular follow-ups. There is a lack of robust mechanisms to review these care leavers' needs, to determine what ongoing support they require as they reach the age of 21. Senior leaders had already recognised some of these shortfalls. However, the extent of the practice deficits was not fully understood by them until the inspection. As a result of these weaknesses too many vulnerable care leavers are not getting the right level of help, support or protection.
35. Most care leavers remain allocated to their social worker, which supports a smooth move into care leaving services. Some care leavers with more complex needs are allocated to PAs on the basis they will receive tailored support in line with their needs. Planning for most care leavers who move into leaving care arrangements is effective, with social workers and PAs helping younger care

leavers to navigate change and step into independence at a pace that is right for them.

36. Some care leavers benefit from the support of highly committed and caring social workers and PAs. These workers are able to speak positively about their care leavers and build trusting and meaningful relationships with them. Most social workers and PAs are in touch with their care leavers regularly, the frequency of contact being determined by how often care leavers need or want to see them. However, for some other care leavers, social workers and PAs do not know their personal stories of why, or when, they came into care.
37. The quality of pathway plans for care leavers is highly variable and leads to an ineffective provision of support. In better examples, pathway plans are purposeful and are written in collaboration with the care leaver. Weaker examples contain out-of-date information and are insufficiently focused on need. Most pathway plans are not child-centred and are difficult to read and understand, due to the large volume of historical information contained within them. PAs told inspectors that this is often unhelpful for the emotional well-being of care leavers, having to regularly revisit the life challenges that they have faced. Despite PAs having recognised and raised this with managers, changes were not made to the pathway plans. Pathway plans explicitly reference that care leavers will receive support until 21. This is practice that was found to be lacking during the inspection. Plans detailed that further support between 21 and 25 is only available if care leavers are in higher education; otherwise, support will be advice and guidance only, meaning a significant number of care leavers were not able to access their rights and entitlements. Support for some care leavers who are not accessing education or employment is not robust, and pathway plans lack vigour in the exploration of this. During the inspection, senior leaders confirmed they will take action to improve the format and quality of plans for care leavers, as well as undertaking to ensure care leavers' experiences of support and help are dramatically improved. The quality of pathway plans was identified as an area for improvement at the last inspection.
38. Some care leavers who are at risk are not receiving sufficiently effective support from practitioners. There is a lack of professional curiosity about their day-to-day lives and living arrangements. This has resulted in a failure to understand risk and how best to support care leavers when they are at their most vulnerable. When potential risk of harm for care leavers is identified, PAs and managers were unable to demonstrate how this risk is held or mitigated effectively. Management oversight for these care leavers is not thorough or driven by professional challenge. This has contributed to ineffective planning and support.
39. Social workers and PAs are aware of and understand the local offer and are confident that care leavers are adequately signposted to it. Despite this, care leavers told inspectors that they were not aware of the local offer. Not all care



leavers are accessing the full range of entitlements or services available to them.

40. For most care leavers living in unsuitable accommodation, the support from social workers and PAs is not strong enough. Visits are not in line with their needs and feature a lack of professional curiosity as to ongoing risks and what this means. Some care leavers are, however, being actively supported to develop the skills they need to access accommodation and to stay in placements of their choosing.
41. When care leavers become 21, unless they are in education or highly vulnerable, they are no longer provided with a social worker, PA or leaving care services. At the time of this inspection, there were over 130 care leavers in this situation. A further 21 care leavers aged 18 to 21 have also been closed to the service. Some of these care leavers have not been receiving the services they need or are entitled to, and the local authority cannot be assured that they are safe. Senior leaders took immediate action during the inspection to review the circumstances of all of these care leavers. This was supported by a detailed action and improvement plan, as to next steps, for each of the care leavers and for the wider service.
42. Inspectors were told by practitioners that most care leavers in custody are closed to the service and only those at the highest risk are kept open. For those care leavers in custody who remain open to the local authority, PAs make repeated efforts to maintain contact and they are visited regularly. Relationships between care leavers and their worker are sustained during their sentence. For care leavers who are parents, there is insufficient support and limited evidence of robust planning to ensure effective safeguarding of both care leavers and their children.
43. Support for many unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers is ineffective. Their needs are not consistently recorded in pathway plans. When young people go missing, little effort is made to find them and ensure they are safe. For some, strategy meetings have not been convened. There is very little challenge from the senior leadership team to escalate concerns for this cohort of young people to their police counterparts when they are not taking appropriate actions. During the inspection, leaders confirmed they would review this cohort of young people and take immediate action where necessary.
44. Care leavers can access community-based resources and are able to visit council offices to seek out support. Leaders are continuing the search to identify a local resource for care leavers.
45. Care leavers' physical health needs are mostly met through local health service provision. Care leavers are offered emotional support by their PAs when they are concerned about their health and encouraged to attend relevant appointments. Pathway plans are very brief in the exploration of the health needs of care leavers. Not all care leavers are aware of the content or location

of their health information. This was identified as an area for improvement at the last inspection.

46. Care leavers are encouraged to take part in a wide range of activities. None of the care leavers who spoke with inspectors had been involved in the design of the service or policies. This is a missed opportunity as they have many ideas as to how to improve the service.

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

47. Since the appointment of the permanent director of children's services, shortly after the JTAI in 2023, action has been taken to restructure children's services, following the commissioning of a number of independent reviews. This has delivered practice improvements in a number of key areas. However, despite some improvements, the extent of shortfalls in practice in the care leavers' service had not been fully understood until this inspection.
48. Leaders have been able to sustain practice in some areas. The launch of the new children and families hub has strengthened the early help offer. There have been improvements to the quality of child in need and child protection plans. Stronger arrangements are now in place to track the progress of children in the PLO to reduce delay, and the response to children at risk of exploitation has been strengthened. Care planning for children is underpinned by clear assessments. The local authority's response to 16- and 17-year-old homeless children needs to improve and its services to care leavers have significantly deteriorated.
49. The corporate and political support for children and care leavers in Harrow has not adequately ensured that the needs of children and young people have been consistently met. The lead member appropriately acknowledges that there is much more to do for care leavers in Harrow. Leaders recognise that children in care and care leavers need to be offered wider opportunities to participate and be involved in developing services, recruitment and the delivery of training to local authority staff and partners. There are no specific apprenticeship schemes for care leavers. In the absence of these, leaders are providing them with work experience within the council to support them in furthering their careers. Despite existing strategic senior leadership plans for care leavers, no tangible impact on the lives of children and young people can be seen.
50. Although the council faces financial pressures, there has been further investment to strengthen services and increase staffing capacity. Throughout this inspection, leaders have been open and transparent, and they recognise the improvements required to address the remaining challenges to bring about positive change in the lives of the most vulnerable children and care leavers.
51. Despite the local authority being aware of its corporate parenting duties for children in care and care leavers, there is a disconnect between the sense of

responsibility and line of sight to the quality of practice for care leavers. The corporate parenting strategy is not co-produced with children and care leavers. The local offer has been reviewed with input from care leavers. The offer is statutorily compliant but lacks ambition for care leavers and their needs and aspirations. The local offer is not communicated effectively to all care leavers, which means that they are not all aware of, nor do they access, their full range of entitlements. The care-experienced council for children and care leavers aged 14 to 23 is in its infancy and care leavers are not enabled to have an impact on service design and delivery. The corporate parenting board does not directly hear from children and young people. Although leaders are aware of this and have inclusion and co-production plans for children and young people, at the time of the inspection they had not implemented them.

52. While the sufficiency strategy identifies the need to place children locally, with a need to recruit more foster carers, it does not provide an up-to-date analysis of the profile of cared for children. Although the local authority is not currently facing a placement sufficiency shortage for its cared for children, the strategy does not clearly identify the themes and challenges it faces. Nor does it include any plans which detail how Harrow intends to meet the diverse sufficiency needs of children in care going forward.
53. Senior leaders have welcomed scrutiny from the sector and the support and challenge provided by partners in practice and independent reviews across all services. Leaders and managers are reflective and use learning from practice and feedback to improve the experiences and care of children. Throughout the inspection, they were responsive and acknowledged practice shortfalls promptly, making changes when necessary. This included contacting a proportion of care leavers aged over 21 years to establish their whereabouts and to clarify whether they required additional support.
54. Although the local authority undertakes regular audit activity, the quality and impact of this are variable. More needs to be done to 'close the loop' to support audit activity that is consistently having an impact on outcomes for children and to ensure that areas of poor practice are identified. Leaders are now aware of this and have acknowledged that there is still more work to do, to ensure that they have a strengthened line of sight to practice.
55. Although the local authority self-evaluation was reflective of areas of strength and development for children in need of help and protection and children in care, it was not accurate in its assessment for care leavers, nor for leaders and managers. While an improvement plan is driving forward change through targeted improvement activity, the implementation of the plans for care leavers is not sufficiently focused or timely. A suite of performance data is available across all services and regular scrutiny is undertaken by senior leaders. Improvements have been achieved in the completion of assessments and the timeliness of initial child protection conferences. Despite this, systems have not been used effectively to identify vulnerable care leavers who are not receiving the services they need.

56. Although most social workers and PAs receive regular supervision, this is not always sufficiently analytical or reflective, or of a consistent quality. There is regular management oversight of practice, although the quality of this is highly variable. Leaders have recognised this and are providing ongoing training and development. For some children, this lack of effective management oversight has led to drift and delay and their needs not being recognised or acted upon.
57. Strengthening and stabilising the workforce through the recruitment and retention of social workers are priorities for leaders in Harrow. Leaders recognise that these are essential in order for children to benefit from enduring relationships with social workers who know them well. However, too many children still experience too many changes in social worker.
58. High caseloads are undermining meaningful work with some children and care leavers.
59. Most staff told inspectors that they enjoy working in Harrow, and that they are well supported by visible, available and approachable managers, who care and make them feel valued. Most workers, including agency workers and international social workers, say that they have access to relevant training to assist them in their work. However, PAs told inspectors that their training is not prioritised, and they are not afforded the same opportunities as social workers.

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