

Inspection of Brent local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 27 April to 1 May 2026

Lead inspector: Monique Lindsay, His Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care	Good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Good

Children in Brent benefit from responsive, compassionate social work that is firmly rooted in their individual needs and lived experiences. Practitioners know their children well and invest in building trusting relationships with them and their families. The local authority is part of a diverse borough, and its workforce reflects this richness, bringing cultural understanding and commitment to its work.

Since the previous inspection in 2023, when services were judged to be good overall, the experienced leadership team has maintained a clear focus on continuous improvement. The implementation of the Family First reforms has begun in earnest, with a family help service already operational and providing a coherent continuum of support. The relationship between early help and statutory services is well understood, so that children and families receive the right level of support at the right time.

Across most areas, practice is child centred and purposeful. Multi-agency working is highly developed, and partners work collaboratively to support children at risk. Children in care and care leavers benefit from committed practitioners who advocate strongly on their behalf, and care leavers experience meaningful relationships with their personal advisers (PAs). Leaders are approachable and responsive, promoting shared values and a positive and supportive working environment for practitioners and managers. Further development is needed in some areas of practice to secure consistently strong outcomes for all children.

What needs to improve?¹

- The consistency with which work with children subject to care proceedings, and the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline (PLO) is progressed, in particular the management oversight and decision making of this work. (Outcome 2, national framework)
- The consideration of children's previous history in decision-making in the Brent family front door. (Outcome 2, national framework)
- The consistency and quality of life-story work for children in long-term care. (Outcome 4, national framework)
- The completion of mandatory training for approved foster carers. (Outcome 4, national framework)

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

1. The local authority is actively progressing the Family First reforms, and a family help service is already operational, offering targeted early help to prevent issues escalating into serious concerns. Support offered is built on an understanding of the family's own determination of their needs and enhanced through involving a suitable range of partner agencies. Children's needs and circumstances are appropriately stepped up, down and across services as their situations change, with the family help service providing support to children through their family support teams, child protection and court teams. Families are largely positive about the help they receive.
2. Children and families who require help and support receive a prompt response at the Brent Family Front Door (BFFD). Children receive the right level of intervention at the earliest opportunity. Decision-making is usually well reasoned and informed by children's voices, parents' views and professional curiosity, with clear risk ratings applied by team managers and explicit reference to the threshold of need document. Screening routinely includes analysis supported by research, identifying strengths, historical context and presenting risks, with feedback being provided to referrers. Risk to children and their needs are identified by practitioners who are supported by regular management oversight.
3. The cumulative nature of risk and need identified in previous referrals does not always sufficiently inform risk assessment and decision-making for children and their current lived experiences. When referrals result in no further action, there is not always sufficient curiosity about previous referral histories and prior management decisions. For a very small number of children, insufficient

¹ 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.

consideration of repeat contacts means that opportunities to intervene early and decisively are missed.

4. Children at risk of, or experiencing, harm are considered through timely, and generally well-attended, multi-agency child protection strategy discussions and enquiries. There is effective information-sharing, accurate analysis of risk and proportionate safety planning, which means individual needs and associated risks are responded to swiftly for most children. Social workers see children promptly, often alone, and take time to understand their experiences, also keeping parents informed of actions taken and the rationale for them.
5. Assessments of children's needs are thorough and recorded sensitively, capturing children's lived experiences well and incorporating the relevant history and information from families and partner agencies. Children's voices are strongly evident throughout assessments, with direct work included and children's own words used in stronger examples. Assessments result in appropriate plans for children. Leaders acknowledge that the period of transition to the new Family Help model had a negative impact on assessment timeliness in some teams. They are taking active steps to address this.
6. Children at risk of harm are considered at initial child protection conferences (ICPCs) that are convened within statutory timescales, resulting in mostly robust child protection plans. When delays occur between strategy discussions and an ICPC, the recording of visits and safety planning during this period is not always consistent. Children subject to child in need or child protection plans benefit from child-focused plans with clear actions. When plans are not effective at securing sufficient progress for children, escalation is used appropriately and many children make positive progress.
7. Core group practice shows comprehensive engagement with parents and partner agencies, with evidence of progress for many children. Most child protection plans show clear rationale when stepping down to child in need. Practice around neglect is mostly positive, with children experiencing better outcomes when neglect concerns are appropriately escalated. When domestic abuse poses a risk, responses are robust.
8. Arrangements to oversee and track the progress of children subject to care proceedings, and the pre-proceedings stage of the PLO, are not sufficiently robust. Pre-proceedings letters are generally clear about concerns and next steps. However, some children are experiencing delay, and the pre-proceedings tracker is not consistently updated with sufficient information to support timely management oversight and decision-making. This means planning for some children lacks the decisiveness their circumstances require. Risks escalate for a very small number of children.
9. Children benefit from the inclusion of family networks in collaborative planning for their safety. Family-led decision-making meetings are used effectively in order to safeguard and support children. Families and friends are actively

involved in shaping child-focused plans, ensuring that children's voices, needs and lived experiences remain central to key decisions.

10. The LADO service is highly effective and led by an experienced and knowledgeable practitioner in the progression of enquiries into allegations against professionals. Referrals are appropriately managed, with excellent tracking systems in place to monitor live cases, trends and risk, which means children's needs and safety are better understood. Referrals are processed promptly and responses are timely and proportionate and involve professional challenge, with a clear focus on keeping children safe.
11. Children at risk of exploitation receive tenacious, relationship-based support, informed by a strong understanding of extra familial harm. Emerging risks to children at risk of extra familial harm, including sexual exploitation, organised crime and serious youth violence, are identified early by competent and knowledgeable workers in the Targeted Prevention Hub. Support is provided by a wide range of statutory and voluntary agencies. The Exploitation, Violence and Vulnerability Panel provides strong multi-agency oversight of planning and decision-making for children. Comprehensive mapping of peer groups, places and spaces of concern leads to timely and bespoke interventions, which means risk to children is well understood and consideration is given to their safety.
12. Children who go missing are supported by a coordinated multi-agency response through the BFFD, established panels and daily briefings with police. Return home interviews are offered to children, although practitioners are not always successful in making contact. When completed, return home interviews are generally thorough and child centred, but the recording of analysis drawn from these interviews for a few children, and how information informs future planning, is not always coherently captured. This means children may continue to go missing and face risk, without practitioners having a full understanding of push and pull factors.
13. Disabled children and their families receive assistance that is highly effective, from practitioners who build trusting, respectful relationships with children and parents. Risks for disabled children are clearly identified and comprehensively assessed, and intervention from skilled workers across the wider partnership is implemented with appropriate determination, resulting in sustained positive change for children.
14. Children with caring responsibilities are identified and supported well by social workers and a range of partner agencies, including schools and adult services. The number of children identified as young carers has increased significantly over the past year because of a determined awareness-raising programme, reflecting a real commitment to this group of children.
15. Children aged 16 or 17 who present as homeless receive a response that is timely, with support provided for them to have a safe place to live while joint housing assessments are completed. This includes living with extended family when appropriate. Practitioners provide early access for children to

independent advocacy, which ensures that practitioners understand children's views and preferred options.

16. Effective partnership working and engagement with schools means that timely and appropriate action is taken to respond to children who are at risk of going missing from education, including those known to children's social care. Professionals working collaboratively ensure effective oversight of children who are electively home educated, and they take prompt action when there are any safeguarding concerns.
17. Children living in private fostering arrangements benefit from timely assessment of their needs, and consideration of permanence when appropriate. Awareness-raising activity with faith groups and in social work teams has strengthened understanding of private fostering arrangements so that children are identified quickly and can access support as needed.
18. The emergency duty team provides a timely and proportionate out-of-hours response to children in need or at risk, and attempts are made to gather multi-agency information, including from the police and health services. For a small number of children, inconsistent recording, management oversight and information-sharing limit the team's effectiveness. Leaders were aware of these limitations, and they are implementing a focused improvement plan with key areas for development.
19. Children on the edge of care benefit from skilled practitioners, who build rapport and trusting relationships quickly, enabling children and their families to be supported to stay together safely.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

20. Most children, including unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, come into care when it is right for them. Social workers take time to build strong relationships with children in care, visiting them across a range of settings and often seeing them alone. Social workers spend time understanding children's behaviours, discussing their experiences and ensuring that cultural, religious and identity needs are well understood and actively supported. For many children, settled relationships have developed, building the trust they need as they move into adulthood.
21. Children's permanence pathways are explored, with permanence plans identified at the earliest opportunity and progressed in a timely manner for most children. Appropriate permanence options are considered for children, including reunification, adoption and long-term kinship arrangement placements. Managers use a tracker in supervision to challenge any delay and to triangulate information to build a fuller picture of children's experiences. Senior leaders use multiple assurance routes to ensure that children are not experiencing delays in their care, such as the entry to care and residential panels.

22. Children are supported to remain living with their parents or extended family when it is safe for them to do so. Kinship arrangements are used effectively in order to support permanence, with kinship carers either becoming connected foster carers or special guardians. Many children in long-term foster homes are appropriately matched with their carers, providing assurance and certainty about future arrangements. Senior leaders approve decisions for children in care to be placed at home with their parents, following thorough assessment of need and risk.
23. Children's care plans reflect their changing circumstances and are updated regularly during looked-after reviews. Care plans are appropriately focused on meeting children's needs, and children attend their reviews and participate in planning for their futures.
24. Family-time arrangements are flexible and take place to meet children and families' wishes, including overnight stays, video calls and time with staff providing the care for children. This helps families and children to maintain relationships that are important to them.
25. Family network meetings are used effectively to support collaborative decision-making with families and friends, allowing children to be at the heart of planning. When adoption is the right plan for a child, practitioners work promptly alongside the regional adoption agency to find suitable homes, with well-written child permanence reports and strong management and independent reviewing officer (IRO) oversight.
26. Children in care benefit from IROs who have exceptionally strong knowledge of them and their lived experiences, which supports thorough planning for children. Concerns are escalated effectively, guardians and advocacy services are involved, and children's progress is monitored closely through regular midway review conversations. IROs write sensitively to children about their journeys and the decisions being made for them, forming an important part of their life story. IROs spoke positively about social workers' relationships with their children and their quick response to any escalation in children's needs or increasing risks.
27. Children's health needs are prioritised, and they have access to specialist health appointments when medical needs are identified. Children are registered with GPs and health information is incorporated into their care plans. When children experience emotional difficulties or self-harm, they receive therapeutic support through CAMHS, their schools and in children's homes, so that children's mental health needs are sensitively considered, and they can talk about how they feel.
28. Children in care are supported well to progress in their education. The experienced and aspirational headteacher of the virtual school, supported by a stable and well-regarded team, knows children and their individual circumstances well. The virtual school plays a key role in maintaining the quality and timeliness of personal education plans. Educational outcomes for

children in care are improving, with increasing engagement from schools and education providers in supporting children's progress. Improving school attendance levels for children in care is still a challenge, especially for children in secondary schools, and the service is rightly giving this a high priority. Children benefit from a wide range of enrichment and wider learning opportunities.

29. Children in care who go missing or who are at risk of exploitation benefit from a well-coordinated multi-agency response. Social workers and partner agencies typically manage risks effectively. However, there is some inconsistency in the quality and timeliness of return home interviews for children in care, particularly for those recorded as 'absent'. A lack of recorded analysis reduces the value of these interviews in informing longer-term planning for children.
30. Many children in care live in stable, loving foster homes. Unregistered children's homes, although rarely used, are supported by clear policies and procedures to aid the monitoring of these arrangements. At the point of this inspection, no children were living in unregistered children's homes. Further to evaluation of their needs, some children in care are living in supported accommodation and are helped to move effectively into adulthood.
31. Most children, when possible, live locally with Brent's own foster carers, who know the children well and are proud of their achievements. Foster carers value the support they receive and the sense of working collaboratively for and with children. Foster carer assessments are generally completed within expected timescales. Leaders have not set out their expectations regarding mandatory training for foster carers clearly enough. Some carers' training has been out of date for some time, potentially affecting carers' ability to meet the complex needs of children in their care.
32. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children benefit from strong support. Practitioners build enduring relationships with children, ensuring that their needs and circumstances are understood and considered in their care plans. Children live in stable, nurturing homes; they are helped to register with health services, and support with their legal status is swiftly put in place. Children who do not speak English are supported into relevant training courses, with college applications and other educational opportunities. Older children are helped to attend college regularly. Although there is some delay in provision from child and adolescent mental health services, specialist partner agencies help children consider their personal histories and get in touch with family members who they have been unable to contact since making their journey to the UK. Most unaccompanied children in care make good progress and have positive experiences.
33. Life-story work remains underdeveloped for children in long-term foster care. Social workers collect pictures and use direct work tools to ascertain children's views, but children in long-term foster homes do not routinely benefit from a coherent life-story narrative that helps them understand their journey through

care. For younger children, particularly those moving in with adoptive families, life-story work is completed to a stronger standard.

34. Disabled children in care benefit from social workers who demonstrate compassion, build meaningful relationships with them and advocate effectively for their needs. Children who are approaching adulthood are mostly supported well, with residential and foster homes providing positive enrichment experiences and continuity of care, and practitioners creating opportunities for them to develop independence and workplace skills.
35. Brent's children in care council, Brent Care Journeys Empire, provides meaningful opportunities for children in care to have their voices heard on the services they receive, with direct engagement by the Corporate Parenting Committee and purposeful involvement in service development and recruitment activities. Children in care who spoke with inspectors said they were happy where they lived, felt safe, knew their IROs and participated in their reviews. They spoke of having opportunities to explore their interests and spend quality time with family members.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

36. Care leavers benefit from a committed and relational leaving care service. PAs are persistent in their attempts to engage care leavers and build meaningful relationships at the point of a change and increasing responsibility in a child's life. Some care leavers benefit from early introductions to their PAs, helping them to understand their move into adulthood and the support available.
37. Care leavers are supported by PAs who take time to understand their individuality, taking good account of their culture, religion and identity. Relationships between care leavers and PAs are consistently strong, stable and trusting, providing continuity of support across several years for many young people. This enables PAs to develop a detailed understanding of individual young people's histories, needs and aspirations, and to respond flexibly as their circumstances change.
38. Pathway plans are completed promptly and reviewed within appropriate timescales. Young people's own words, views, rights and entitlements are captured exceptionally well in their pathway plans, which are detailed and sensitively written. Care leavers are encouraged to continue their involvement with their PAs beyond the age of 21, to benefit from ongoing support as young adults. While most pathway plans include clear actions, some are less specific, which may limit the ability to measure care leavers' progress and give them a clear understanding of next steps.
39. A supportive local offer provides care leavers with valuable opportunities to learn and develop new skills for life. Care leavers are aware of their entitlements in the local offer, including financial allowances, gym membership, zip cards and oyster card discounts. PAs continue to highlight entitlements as

care leavers grow into adulthood, including making them aware of the higher education bursary available to encourage them to study at a higher level.

40. Care leavers spoke positively of the support that PAs have given to help and encourage them to remain in further education. There is a tailored focus, with PAs supporting individual care leavers to access the right pathways for them. A wide range of bespoke opportunities is available for young people, including theatre placements, work experience with major employers and in-house university support. As a result, an increasing proportion of young people are in education, employment and training.
41. Care leavers' housing needs are well supported, with many living in accommodation that reflects their capacity for independent living and their individual preferences. PAs actively mediate with providers, develop agreements to address rent arrears and take steps to prevent homelessness. However, some care leavers experience too many home moves while in temporary shared accommodation, which has a negative impact on their sense of stability.
42. Care leavers' mental health needs are understood and met effectively. Emotional wellbeing support is available through a range of services, including Elev8, grand mentors, St Giles Trust, advocates and adult mental health services. PAs are generally thoughtful about care leavers' wellbeing and are curious about what changes in presentation or behaviour might mean. Young people at risk have a robust Vulnerable Adolescent Risk Assessment completed and safety plan in place, with referrals made to the Exploitation, Violence and Vulnerability Panel. Referrals to adult services are made when there are mental health concerns and services are available to address concerns related to substance misuse.
43. Care leavers in custody are supported by PAs who show determination in working with them, seeking updates on their welfare even when young people decline contact. They ensure that care leavers understand their rights, entitlements and the support available to them on release. When exploitation risks are associated with an area, care leavers are supported to live in safer locations. A joint initiative with the Youth Justice Service and Resettlement aftercare supports young people when they leave custody to access accommodation and support. Partner agencies provide mentoring that benefits care leavers through their time in custody and beyond.
44. Care leavers who are parents receive tailored support from their PAs, who are responsive to care leavers' individual circumstances and advocate effectively for their needs.
45. Care leavers are supported well to develop independence skills as they transition into adulthood, through practical programmes, including cooking, DIY, financial management and formal qualifications. Care leavers value the range of independence support available to them, recognising these opportunities as giving them skills for life.

46. The service works effectively to reduce feelings of isolation among care leavers, with regular community events, such as games and pizza evenings, supporting connection. Children in care and care leavers spoken with during the inspection shared a range of experiences, with many describing feeling well supported and having access to activities that helped them explore their interests as well as their entrepreneurial and career ambitions.

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

47. Effective leadership across children's services provides a strong and stable foundation for practice. Corporate leaders and elected members share a clear commitment to improving the quality of services for children and their families. The director of children's services and the experienced, stable leadership team provide purposeful direction, and the strategic vision is communicated well across the organisation and with partner agencies. Services for children and young people are a strategic priority in borough-wide plans, contributing to a collaborative system rooted in improving children's experiences and outcomes.
48. Governance arrangements are strong. The Corporate Parenting Committee provides effective challenge and scrutiny across a wide range of topics relevant to children in care and care leavers. There are well-established mechanisms to ensure that the voice of children and young people influences and guides service delivery. Corporate parenting responsibilities are understood and owned at a political level, and senior leaders maintain a clear line of sight to most frontline practice through a range of oversight mechanisms.
49. Leaders know services well. The local authority's self-evaluation is honest and insightful, accurately identifying both the progress achieved and the areas that require further development. Leaders have focused on areas identified at the previous inspection in 2023 and have driven improvement in a number of these. There is a targeted approach to addressing the areas still in need of development, such as life-story work for children in long-term care. Leaders are open and realistic about what needs to further develop, and this reflects a responsive and accountable approach to improvement.
50. Leaders have established a strong learning culture that promotes reflection and continuous improvement. The quality assurance framework is comprehensive, encompassing practice observations, dip sampling, partner engagement and feedback. Audit practice is a particular strength, providing reflective, detailed feedback to practitioners and senior leaders. The voices of children and families are helpfully located at the centre of the audit process.
51. Practitioners have access to relevant learning and development opportunities that support their practice, and many reference weekly training sessions as intensive but useful.

52. Supervision and management oversight are generally regular and reflective, providing practitioners with support and direction. For some practitioners, consistent management and team members provide support, a reflective space and positive help with practice activity. Most records of supervision and management oversight reflect an understanding of risk, analysis and purposeful challenge, supporting effective decision-making and planning.
53. Practitioners and managers demonstrate a high level of commitment and enthusiasm in their work with children and families. Social workers report feeling well supported and they enjoy working in Brent, with many of those spoken to having made a deliberate choice to work in this authority because of the positive working culture. Staff consistently describe leaders as visible, approachable and supportive, valuing the time leaders take to engage directly with teams. Leadership accountability is embedded through regular structured engagement activities, including senior leader updates and training sessions, which contribute to a strong sense of shared purpose and trust across the service.
54. Leaders have a strong and meaningful focus on difference. Brent's Ways of Working and the Inclusion strategy set the right tone and reflect the diversity of the community and workforce. The commitment to anti-racist practice is genuine, visible and embedded, advocating for the values of courage, curiosity and kindness. The diversity of the senior leadership team reflects that of the workforce and the communities served, and staff speak enthusiastically about working in Brent because of the richness of its diversity.
55. Leaders have a strong commitment to kinship care. They have developed an accessible and coherent kinship local offer that details the support offered to all kinship carers and the children they look after. Kinship arrangements are actively promoted and well supported, reflecting leaders' understanding of the importance of identity, belonging and continuity of relationships for children.
56. Strategic partnership working across the borough is effective and well embedded, contributing to both strategic and operational improvements. Leaders collaborate closely with health, education, police, housing and voluntary sector organisations to ensure that services are coordinated and responsive. This collaborative system is well established and insightful; partners understand that while progress has been made, there is more to do, and they are working together around clearly identified priorities.
57. Participation with children and young people is a particular strength. Children's voices are at the centre of practice and wider decision-making. The children in care council and engagement activities for care leavers provide meaningful platforms for children and young people to influence services and support their peers. Leaders value and act on the feedback of children, young people and their families.

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