

# Inspection of Camden local authority children's services

**Inspection dates:** 3 to 7 March 2025

**Lead inspector:** Claire Beckingham, His Majesty's Inspector

| Judgement  | Grade       |
|--|-------------|
| The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families | Outstanding |
| The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection    | Outstanding |
| The experiences and progress of children in care                         | Outstanding |
| The experiences and progress of care leavers                             | Outstanding |
| Overall effectiveness  | Outstanding |

Children and young people in the London Borough of Camden continue to receive excellent support. Leaders have further strengthened and enhanced services since the last inspection in 2022, when services were also judged to be outstanding overall. They have continued to develop their line of sight to frontline practice and provided very effective support to the workforce. While seamlessly navigating changes in the senior leadership team, collectively, Camden has continued to be innovative and ambitious, with multidimensional projects and workstreams to harness ever better support for children and young people.

The already good services and support to children in need of help and protection are now even stronger. Children in care in Camden continue to benefit from excellent corporate parenting. The borough is also delivering outstanding services to care experienced young people. As a result, many of Camden's children and care experienced young people are making exceptional progress.

The few areas for improvement identified at the last inspection are now areas of strength. The local authority designated officer (LADO), emergency duty team (EDT) and quality assurance arrangements are all now highly effective.

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

- The timeliness of decision-making and the impact of escalation and oversight for the small number of children whose plans are not progressing within identified timescales. (Principle 1)

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

1. The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection, already good at the last inspection, are now outstanding.
2. Highly effective early help services are ensuring that children and their families get the right help at the right time. Thorough early help assessments lead to bespoke plans with a wide range of multi-agency interventions for families and individuals. Work is informed by the voices of children, parents and wider family. Family group conferences are used early and throughout the child's journey, enabling families to use existing strengths to solve problems. This prompt and skilfully delivered early help is demonstrably improving children's circumstances and preventing many families from needing statutory interventions. The minority of children whose circumstances do not improve are appropriately stepped up for statutory assessments.
3. When children are referred into the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), decision-making is timely and leads consistently to the right level of intervention. Skilled and confident social workers, supported by strong managerial oversight, gather information from many sources and evaluate historical information to determine appropriate next steps. Almost all children receive swift and decisive help to meet their needs and safeguard their welfare.
4. Increased capacity in the EDT has meant that social workers in this service provide children with a highly effective and timely response out of office hours. This includes visiting children and holding child protection strategy meetings when needed.
5. When statutory assessments are undertaken, children's needs are understood very well. Camden's proactive anti-racist practice is visible in high-quality, detailed assessments that reflect children's often very diverse needs. Practitioners and managers have a good awareness of the disproportionalities affecting Camden communities and seek solutions to help children and families overcome disadvantage. Assessments are rich in their inclusion of the views of children, parents and members of the wider family and kinship network. Social workers carry out tailored direct work that enables children to explain their

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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.

experiences and helps children to trust them. They work at the child's pace, with a clear purpose for their many visits and interactions. Camden's chosen model of practice is well embedded. Staff at all levels are working relationally with children, their families and other professionals.

6. When child protection strategy meetings are needed, these are well attended by partner agencies. Subsequent child protection investigations are timely, with appropriate outcomes and plans which support a thorough, coordinated response for children at risk of harm.
7. Child protection conferences include all relevant professionals, who consider risks carefully and provide a proportionate response to concerns. Children's plans address their needs and are mostly written well. Regular core group meetings help workers ensure a joined-up approach that progresses children's plans. Most children make tangible progress through well-thought-out actions. For a very small number of children, action is not quick enough when their circumstances do not improve.
8. Children benefit from strong, lasting relationships with their social workers. Carefully managed caseloads mean that social workers have the time to undertake and thoroughly record creative direct work with children, enabling them to really get to know children and elicit their views. Children's voices and opinions are valued and given weight in the work undertaken and the plans made for them. Visits to children and their families are purposeful, with care taken to address concerns and to promote positive relationships. Work with families is curious about cultural difference, identity, disadvantage and unique strengths, with time taken to understand what this means for children and their families.
9. Children who go missing from home receive an active response from dedicated workers who understand push-and-pull factors. Support is effective in reducing episodes of going missing and increasing children's safety outside the home. Children at risk of exploitation receive well-coordinated support from the multi-agency network, including a sophisticated response to exploitation by gangs. Camden's multi-agency child exploitation panel (MACE) and multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARAC) are targeted well and assist professionals in identifying opportunities for disruption. Social workers across the service have a good understanding of concerns about exploitation. They complete robust risk assessments to inform the support needed to reduce risks to children.
10. Children and families who experience domestic abuse receive a tailored and comprehensive response from workers across Camden. A very good understanding of domestic abuse and a commitment to cross-council and cross-partnership responses help to ensure that support is mobilised quickly. Practitioners understand the complexity involved in working alongside both perpetrators and victims. They take the time needed to establish a clear picture of the abuse and to assess the associated risks.

11. The complex needs of disabled children in need and their families are understood very well. Work undertaken to support them is thoughtful and respectful. Multi-agency assessment and early transition planning provide the foundations for effective help for children as they grow into adulthood and independence, supported by professionals who know them well.
12. Young people aged 16 and 17 who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless receive a prompt, sensitive and child-centred response. This is enabling them to live in suitable accommodation, with independent advocacy to help them understand their rights and have their voices heard.
13. Children in private fostering arrangements have their needs met well. Targeted work to raise awareness of private fostering is ongoing.
14. When risks to children are so significant that the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline process is initiated, children and their families continue to receive and access an impressive array of services to try to avoid care proceedings. This is successful for many of the families concerned. Decisions to escalate children's cases into proceedings when their experiences are not improving are appropriate. Parenting assessments, special guardianship assessments and assessments of the needs of brothers and sisters that are prepared for court are of high quality and help to ensure that decisions are made in children's best interests at the earliest opportunity.
15. A new edge of care service is showing signs of success in helping families address the underlying reasons for breakdown between parents and teenagers. Family group conferences are used to help to mobilise support and find alternatives to care.
16. Workers understand young carers' needs well, helping these children access services and involving wider family members to support them and their parents.
17. The LADO has highly effective systems in place to track all consultations and referrals. This is a significant improvement since the last inspection.
18. School leaders value the quality of training and the breadth of information they receive from Camden. They express a high degree of confidence in the decisions made by children's social care. Partnership working is mature and children missing education (CME) and those electively home educated (EHE) are identified and monitored well, with an effective response to safeguarding concerns. There are clear procedures and lines of sight to identify CME. The CME team works closely with a wide range of services to secure education for children who are not in school, and almost all are quickly placed. The number of children in Camden who are EHE is increasing. Leaders are acutely aware of emerging trends and are identifying underlying reasons for this increase. They have strengthened their processes for schools to record and report any vulnerabilities when a child becomes EHE. This ensures better information to support risk assessments.

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

19. Children in Camden's care receive outstanding support, and as a result are making good progress. Social workers undertake creative, purposeful and fun direct work with children. Manageable caseloads enable workers to maintain a high level of engagement with children, who are consequently able to build trusting relationships with them. Workers write detailed and thoughtful records of their time spent with children. These records are enriched by photos, videos and messages full of mutually exchanged warmth and care.
20. Children come into care in a timely way when it is not safe for them to remain at home, or when they present as unaccompanied asylum-seeking (UAS) children. Early planning and joint work with the kinship care team explores options within the child's family, including special guardianship. This is routinely addressed through family group conferences. Decisions to separate children from brothers and sisters are not undertaken lightly. Careful work is done with children to seek their views and explain to them what different permanence options will mean for them. When children cannot live with friends or family, the vast majority live in suitable, stable placements which meet their needs and where they experience strong, affectionate relationships with their carers.
21. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) write to children sensitively to explain decisions about their lives and to celebrate their successes. The child's voice is consistently heard and acted upon. IROs are championing things that are important to each individual child. Most children benefit from well-planned support that helps them achieve better outcomes in their lives. However, for a small number of children, the preferred permanence option is unclear or the wait for permanence to be formally recognised is longer than necessary and the impact of oversight in progressing this minority of children's plans is less visible.
22. Children's views about who in their family they want to see are given weight, and social workers are tenacious in re-establishing contact with family members in a way that might repair relationships. A focus on lifelong links is a strength in Camden, with children telling inspectors about opportunities to get together with people they thought they had lost. Social workers consistently focus on helping children celebrate their uniqueness and they recognise the importance of engaging families. Direct work includes cultural genograms devised at family events. The use of a digital platform for collating photos, videos and cards is helping to capture memories and adds to stories for later life. It is a strength that children and parents contribute to this directly.
23. Social workers appreciate children's needs for everyday positive childhood experiences, including sleepovers, access to social media or going out increasingly unsupervised with friends. Delegated authority is appropriately in place for children, and when additional guidance or negotiation is needed, these issues are prioritised quickly, so children do not miss out, with a proportionate and parental consideration of risks and opportunities for children to develop independence.

24. Most children in care achieve well. Camden has high expectations for the quality and completion of personal education plans (PEPs), which consistently capture the voice of the child. The virtual school follows up with partners when these expectations are not met. Schools are supported to access tutoring, therapy or specialist support for children when it is needed. The council has worked with colleges to ensure they also have designated teachers for children in care and ensure that the needs of these students are a high priority.
25. Children in care readily access a range of specialist support, as staff from many partner agencies are co-located in the service. These include housing support, the virtual school and mental health support. Health assessments and support for children in care are coordinated effectively and key tasks are performed well, including discharge summaries for all children leaving care, regardless of their age. Almost all children are up to date with routine medical appointments and reviews. When they are not, workers know why not, and they can clearly articulate what is being done to encourage the child to attend health reviews and appointments with dentists and opticians. Children's emotional and mental health needs are closely monitored and are addressed well. A myriad of commissioned services expedite the right support for children when they need it.
26. When children in care go missing repeatedly, they are routinely offered the opportunity to share their experiences and most take up the opportunity. This informs planning for the child, including disruption activity with adults or peers who may pose a risk to them or to other children. This robust approach is helping to reduce episodes of going missing.
27. When children on care orders are placed with their parents, practice is variable. While child in care reviews ratify plans for the child, and visits made to the home are regular, scrutiny is less evident for a small number of these children.
28. In extreme circumstances, a small number of children live in unregistered children's homes. Discussions with inspectors about arrangements for one child resulted in leaders further strengthening their guidance to workers.
29. UAS children in Camden receive exceptional support. The prevalence and availability of skilled support embedded within the children in care and care experienced service is an important factor in helping these children recover from the trauma they have experienced. A persistent focus on access to appropriate legal representation, and on liaison with the Home Office to progress immigration status, helps to reduce children's anxieties.
30. Disabled children in care have their needs met well in Camden. Social workers talk with pride and extensive knowledge about the children they support. Children's voices are captured well, using a range of communication techniques. Planning for transition to adult services starts early and is effective.

31. Camden's fostering service has a dedicated recruitment and assessment element. This has been highly successful in achieving an increase in the number of approved foster carers, through creative approaches that include an agreed housing offer to rehouse foster carers and create additional space for foster children. An impressive range of valued post-approval training has been developed in consultation with foster carers, from foundational courses for new carers to advanced sessions on trauma-informed care, therapeutic parenting and supporting children with complex needs.
32. Close collaboration and regular communication between Camden and the regional adoption agency (Adopt London North - ALN) is helping achieve successful adoptions for children. Monthly tracking meetings bring teams together to discuss all children allocated for family finding, including early permanence. This works well to address issues and prevent delays. Adopters are positive about their experience of Camden, with social workers described as strong advocates for children. The local authority works closely with ALN on family contact and on important links for children, including with their brothers and sisters. Children being placed with adopters receive services promptly to support their transition to their new families and ensure their needs are met. Ongoing support for children through the adoption support fund helps them to address previous trauma and to manage time with their birth family.

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

33. The progress and experiences of care leavers are outstanding. Practice by social workers and personal advisers (PAs) is consistently strong and often exceptional. This is resulting in sustained improvement in care experienced young people's lives. Care leavers seamlessly transition to PA support, with introductions taking place before the crucial time of transitioning to adulthood. Despite some caseload pressures, greatly invested and impressive PAs ensure care leavers are not disadvantaged through their care status. The council's decision to consider care experience a protected characteristic has boosted efforts to tackle inequity. Pivotal to the success of relationships between care leavers and their PAs is the respect PAs have for young people's individuality, heritage, life experiences and aspirations. Care experienced young people told inspectors that they 'feel safe, cared for and valued'.
34. Support for physical and emotional well-being runs through young people's child in care and care leaver journeys. A child in care nurse maintains contact with care leavers after they turn 18 to ensure they have plans in place for any follow-up medical appointments. In close liaison with child in care nurses, UAS children and young people receive screening for health conditions related to fleeing danger and travelling to safety. Good mental health is seen as crucial for children and young people. Camden has a particularly strong and effective mental health offer for care experienced young people, with over 20 commissioned and co-located services in Camden available to children in care and care leavers. Young people who want and need mental health support are accessing it. Provision includes diagnosis and treatment up to age 25, clinical

support for foster carers, social workers and PAs, and supported accommodation offering mental health risk assessment and direct intervention to avoid the need for hospitalisation. When care leavers are reluctant to access therapeutic support, this is kept under active review, with a recognition that the timing needs to be right around events in their lives.

35. Camden care leavers are achieving educationally. Close working relationships between workers in the virtual school and care leavers themselves reflect leaders' deep understanding of the holistic needs of young people. Care experienced young people are supported well when education or work becomes tricky to maintain, with creative ways to maintain a level of education or divert to other educational pathways. Opportunities for internships and apprenticeships are numerous and increasing. Leaders work proactively across the council and have harnessed the commitment of local businesses to secure the best work and training opportunities for their children and young people.
36. An impressive accommodation pathway and offer ensures that care experienced young people receive the right level of support. Most young people are able to live in the borough, with a range of high-quality homes suited to their level of independence, including 'staying put' and supported accommodation. Living locally makes it much easier for them to maintain contact with their families and people who are important to them. They can access their PAs readily, with this set to become even more embedded following the securing of a property to develop the new care leavers' hub.
37. Sensitively co-produced pathway plans fully reflect young people's identity. Importantly, workers consider care experienced young people's 'tipping points' and find ways to help them navigate these periods of high stress. Pathway plans are updated when young people's circumstances change, and they continue to be developed for older care leavers.
38. Camden's local offer is aspirational and thoughtful, reflecting the council's commitment to helping care experienced young people become thriving adults. Targeted support to overcome financial and emotional stresses is making a difference to care leavers' lives. Bespoke pathways for specific groups within the offer enable effective and timely support to reduce vulnerability. Care experienced young people who are parents receive additional financial and practical assistance that recognises their strengths as parents and the rewards and challenges that parenting brings. The offer for care leavers in custody helps young people to integrate successfully back into the community, with a particularly strong accommodation response.
39. Sensible conversations take place when care experienced young people reach 21 about remaining active in the service. This ensures that care experienced young people remain supported by people who know them and care about them, sometimes beyond the age of 25. Leaders endorse PAs' commitment to developing long and trusting relationships with those they support.



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

40. Since the last inspection, the local authority has managed a change in director of children's services (DCS) and separated the director of adults' services and DCS roles smoothly. Strategic leadership remains a standout strength, with children in Camden benefiting from a stable leadership team with a common vision for services. Leadership transcends children's services, with effective joint working with adult services, health services, the police and other agencies, as a well-developed whole-system approach to effective frontline practice. Leaders are embracing the national children's social care reforms in the development of practice and services. Strong, mature partnerships extend to working with education providers, housing services, local businesses and entrepreneurs, sports agencies, and voluntary and community sector partners, to add to the support and opportunities available to Camden children.
41. Leaders are ambitious community parents for all Camden children, not just those in contact with children's social care or early help services. Young people spoke to inspectors with warmth and pride about being Camden residents. Co-production runs through every service, strategy and work stream, with children, young people, parents and experts by experience providing feedback and influencing service development. Children told inspectors that leaders listen to them, and they were keen to give examples of how they shape and change services. Children feel a part of solutions and Camden has embraced the unique, exciting perspectives, energy and opportunities that their voices bring.
42. Children benefit from strong political and corporate support. Governance arrangements are well established and the DCS, the chief executive, the lead member and the leader of the council all have a well-informed, detailed and impressive shared knowledge about strengths and areas for development in Camden. They challenge each other for ever more creative ways of achieving results for children. The atmosphere is highly energetic, deeply ambitious and infectious. Leaders are outward-looking; they seek learning from others and are keen to share what they know works well with the wider sector, including as sector-led improvement partners since 2024. Camden leaders work with national government and regional agencies to influence positive change.
43. Leaders have ensured significant and long-standing investment in early help for families, which has contributed to reducing rates of statutory intervention. The numerous projects, capital and revenue initiatives, workstreams and developments active in Camden demonstrate innovative, confident leadership exploring all options to achieve ever greater positive impact for children. Leaders know who their most vulnerable children are, and they prioritise and bolster resources to tackle tricky and stubborn issues. Camden's responses to domestic abuse, risks outside the home and the mental health needs of children (and adults) are exceptionally strong across the service.

44. Partners, including the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), the judiciary, school leaders and the independent scrutineer, all describe the local authority as responsive, ahead of trends and always keen to be part of a solution. Leaders' commitment to social justice and to creating opportunities for the disadvantaged and those with protected characteristics are evident across a wide range of programmes, including their community wealth fund, STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics) and apprenticeships.
45. The commitment to anti-racist practice and relational practice is evident in practice with children and families. Black and global majority staff told inspectors that there is more to do to challenge disproportionality for families, but that the conversation is very much alive and developing in Camden. They also spoke about the council's commitment to ensuring opportunities for their career development.
46. Senior leaders have a clear line of sight to frontline practice, supported through key committees and boards and a strong suite of data and dashboards that they use to monitor and drill down into key performance indicators and trends. Camden's quality assurance framework is effective and evolving. The council has invested in resourcing this aspect of their work, including learning from feedback. The local authority's self-evaluation is exceptionally accurate, and almost all issues that inspectors brought to leaders' attention were already the focus of action. Where inspectors found discrete areas for improvement for a minority of children, leaders strengthened procedures immediately.
47. This culture of learning, improvement and putting things right is well embedded. It extends to Camden workers, who see having their work audited and practice observation as things to learn from and to welcome. This commitment to curiosity, learning and openness to feedback enables refreshing, mature conversations at all levels. Management oversight of children's progress and reflective supervision are mostly strong across services, although there is more to do to strengthen impact for a minority of children when plans are not progressing in a timely manner.
48. Leaders have focused on building an increasingly stable, happy and well-supported workforce. Almost all practitioners reported that they have good access to training and development opportunities. Staff mostly have manageable caseloads that enable them to undertake thorough and impactful work for children and young people. Workers at all levels, including business support staff, early help workers, social workers, personal advisers and frontline managers, say they enjoy working for Camden. They are fierce advocates for Camden children.

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