Harrow Monitoring Group publication

Before a child loses their family:

a Harrow review of early support, care and adoption

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Executive summary

This paper examines whether Harrow provides timely support to birth families and fully considers safe family alternatives before children enter care or are adopted. Ofsted has identified strengths in early help and work to keep families together, alongside weaknesses in parental involvement and support for disabled children, many of whom enter care during crises. The evidence does not establish unnecessary adoption in Harrow, but warrants closer scrutiny of how decisions are reached. HMG calls for clearer public assurance that practical support, extended family capacity and children's cultural and religious needs inform decisions, with safeguarding central throughout.

Why early support matters

One in 118 babies in England is involved in care proceedings before their first birthday, according to research reported by the BBC on 6 October 2026. The rate has risen by 64% over two decades, although it has recently levelled off after a pandemic peak. Experts warn that some babies might have remained safely with their birth families if effective support had arrived sooner. For Harrow, the question is whether services intervene early enough to prevent avoidable crises and fully explore supported family alternatives.

Children must be protected from abuse and serious neglect, and urgent removal is sometimes necessary. Adoption can provide lasting safety and stability, but entering care and being adopted are separate decisions. Assessment must consider both the risks to the child and what parents could achieve with appropriate help. Adoption permanently changes legal family relationships, with lasting implications for siblings, identity, heritage and contact with birth relatives.

Harrow's published figures show 176 children looked after at 31 March 2025, including 10 babies aged under one and 28 children aged one to four. Its overall care rate was 29 per 10,000 children, compared with 67 across England. These are snapshots, not annual counts of care proceedings. Adoption totals in the Department for Education's published dataset are suppressed, preventing a reliable assessment of local trends.

Harrow's record includes significant strengths alongside weaknesses requiring action. The findings below draw on Ofsted's January 2025 inspection and June 2026 monitoring visit. The latter focused specifically on disabled children and should not be applied to all children's services.

Strengths

- Early help: the January 2025 inspection found a comprehensive range of services, with most referred children receiving effective support.
- Avoiding court proceedings: most children in pre-proceedings were successfully diverted from court action through carefully monitored intervention.
- Keeping families together: inspectors praised flexible support from coaches working with parents and children, including mediation during crises.
- Family alternatives: family group decision-making was used effectively, with active consideration of kinship care and special guardianship.
- Cultural understanding: assessments generally considered children's cultural and religious needs sensitively.
- Care quality: children in care generally made sustained progress in stable placements, with support tailored to their needs.

- Improvement capacity: the June 2026 visit recognised committed practitioners, more stable leadership and well-considered plans to improve disabled children's services.

Weaknesses

- Uneven access to early support: capacity pressures delayed help for some disabled children; lengthy mental health assessment waits also delayed appropriate intervention.
- Insufficient understanding of the whole family: disabled children's assessments did not consistently examine parental capacity, wider family circumstances or siblings' needs.
- Support not reviewed promptly: some disabled children's support packages and assessments were not updated in time to establish whether provision remained adequate.
- Crisis-driven care entry: many disabled children entered care during crises, leaving limited opportunity for planned transitions.
- Family-based alternatives insufficiently explored: this affected some very young disabled children living in residential homes.
- Limited management challenge: supervision in the disabled children's service concentrated on immediate case management, with insufficient reflection and critical analysis.
- Parental understanding and involvement: a very small number of parents were misinformed about parental responsibility during voluntary care arrangements, and fathers were not always consulted.
- Inconsistent explanations before proceedings: some letters did not clearly explain concerns or the changes parents needed to make.
- Staffing pressures: high caseloads and changes of social worker weakened relationships and contributed to delay in some cases.
- Delayed permanence planning: fostering-to-adopt options were not considered early enough for some babies, contributing to multiple moves and broken attachments.

The evidence supports concern about uneven support, family participation and crisis-driven decisions. It does not establish that Harrow routinely removes children too quickly or pursues unnecessary adoptions. Whether earlier help could have prevented particular separations requires examination of individual cases.

Commentary

The practical test is what families can obtain before difficulties escalate. Parenting advice cannot substitute for respite, suitable housing, financial assistance or timely health and disability services where these are needed. Harrow's Family Hub Network provides a route to help, but its effectiveness depends on accessibility, capacity and coordination with other services. Families should not be judged against improvements that depend on assistance they have been unable to obtain.

Harrow's social, cultural and religious diversity makes understanding family relationships especially important. Joint or multigenerational households, grandparents, adult siblings and trusted community connections may provide care, supervision and emotional support. Early family group decision-making should identify who can help, what they can safely offer and what resources they need. Relatives should not be treated as an unlimited source of unpaid care: arrangements may require financial support, training, respite or accommodation. Cultural understanding must inform assessment without excusing harm, stereotyping families or overlooking the wishes of children and parents.

Timing is particularly sensitive around childbirth. The BBC reports that more than half of urgent care hearings in England in 2024–25 concerned newborns, with some mothers facing court within days, or potentially on the day, of giving birth. The BBC also reports that forthcoming guidance would allow judges to refuse cases that do not meet urgency criteria. Where concerns are foreseeable, Harrow should ensure that support and assessment begin during pregnancy, giving families time to participate, obtain legal advice and understand the proposed arrangements. Swift protection and careful preparation are both necessary.

National funding patterns reinforce the concern. The BBC reports a 44% reduction in early intervention spending over a decade, alongside a 50% increase in the costs of looking after children in care. These figures do not establish Harrow's spending pattern, but make it important to examine the balance locally. In Salford, staff at an intensive family support project reported that about three-quarters of referred families stayed together. That experience illustrates the potential of sustained help, without guaranteeing the same results elsewhere.

The government's £2.4 billion commitment to the Families First Partnership programme creates an opportunity that Harrow must translate into demonstrable improvements. The council should publish an anonymised account of infant care proceedings, adoption outcomes, family alternatives and access to early support, with suitable safeguards for small numbers. Councillors need assurance that case reviews examine service gaps alongside parental difficulties. Before permanent separation is proposed, the evidence should show what help was provided, whether it arrived in time and why supported family arrangements could not safely meet the child's needs.

Sources

BBC, 6 October 2026

Ofsted: January 2025 inspection

Ofsted: June 2026 monitoring visit

Ofsted: Harrow local authority data

Department for Education: adoption and special guardianship data

Harrow Family Hub Network

Department for Education: children's social care reforms

About this publication

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