

# Bolton

## Inspection of children's social care services

**Inspection dates: 23 April 2018 to 04 May 2018**

**Lead inspector: John Roughton**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

| <b>Judgement</b>   | <b>Grade</b> |
|--|--------------|
| 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 and care leavers        | Good         |
| Overall effectiveness  | Good         |

Senior leaders and elected members have a clear focus on prioritising support, including financial resources, for Bolton's most vulnerable children. Social work practice and services have improved since the last inspection and are now good, resulting in positive outcomes for most children.

Children in need of immediate protection receive a prompt response from social workers that helps to keep them safe. This is enhanced by the support from partners, who understand and apply thresholds well. Social work practice is good, with appropriate support and intervention offered, which is helping to protect children.

Good support for children who become looked after means that their experiences have improved as a result. Health and education needs are well understood and prioritised. Most children in long-term foster care live in stable homes and make good progress. However, the permanent home for some children is not always

formally agreed, despite them living with the same carer for many years. Care leavers are very well supported and they achieve good outcomes as a result.

### **What needs to improve**

- The understanding of the effectiveness of assessment, intervention and impact at the early help stage.
- The capacity to support children and families affected by the impact of domestic abuse.
- Permanence planning for children in long-term foster care and placed with parents.
- The use of audits to evaluate the impact of practice in improving children's outcomes.
- Transitional planning for children with a disability as they approach adulthood.

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

1. Children who need help and protection are supported by timely and effective services, delivered by skilled social workers, with decisions that are made by managers. Children and their families benefit from access to good preventive and targeted early help services. When children's needs change and risks to their welfare increase, partners make appropriate contacts to children's social care. All contacts about children are screened promptly.
2. Appropriate decisions are made for children who have been referred but whose circumstances do not meet the threshold for social care intervention and are appropriately stepped down to early help. However, systems are not yet effective in providing assurance of the impact of early help assessments and interventions in responding to the needs of children at this level. The recently introduced Early Help Panel is not as well used by partners as it could be, and they do not use the available advice to enable them to assist families. This results in a small number of cases stepping back up to social care sooner than is necessary. Leaders are aware of these issues and they have commenced a review of early help arrangements across the partnership.
3. The Emergency Duty Team (EDT) is line managed from the Multi Agency Screening and Safeguarding Service (MASSS), with effective communication and clear processes for recording and responding promptly on EDT actions the following day, ensuring that there is no delay for children and families in response to identified risks and needs.
4. All cases seen have clear management oversight and rationale for the decision recorded. MASSS managers have access to a 'live' dashboard, enabling them to track work moving through the system. This prevents any drift or delay in responding to children's needs and means that decision-making is timely and appropriate, including where those decisions confirm that no further action is required by children's social care.
5. Strategy discussions are well attended by a range of multi-agency partners. Discussions are child-focused, with good consideration of historical factors. Decisions are clear and appropriate. This is an improvement since the last inspection. Where child protection enquiries have been initiated, effective social work practice means that they have been progressed in a timely manner, with actions and appropriate decisions well recorded to ensure that the risks and needs of children are understood and addressed.
6. The quality of social work assessments has improved since the last inspection and is good. Assessments are thorough and analytical, and research is being

used effectively, with good analysis and direct work used to establish children's views. The graded care profile is being used in assessing some children in response to concerns about neglect, but its use is not yet consistently embedded. When a decision is made for a case to be stepped down to early help following assessment, a clear plan and transfer process is in place in most cases.

7. The quality of social work practice is good. Social workers build effective relationships with families and ensure that the voices of children inform their work. Children benefit from clear planning and proactive interventions, whether subject to child protection or child in need plans. Creative direct work is undertaken with children to ensure that their wishes and feelings are understood and prioritised. Child protection plans are appropriate, regularly updated with clear timescales and enhanced by the level of detail in core group minutes. Where child protection planning is not effective in improving children's experiences, there is timely progression to a well-managed public law outline process.
8. Good management oversight from experienced team managers, who have manageable spans of control, allows for regular formal and informal supervision, and provides staff with effective support to ensure that their work with children and families is purposeful and effective. Supervision records do not always do justice to the quality of supervisory discussions reported by social workers or the quality of work seen by inspectors.
9. Many children in Bolton are affected by being exposed to domestic abuse in their families. A daily domestic abuse multi-agency triage meeting ensures good information sharing, and this informs decision-making, with appropriate follow-up actions. The Bolton Domestic Abuse and Violence Partnership Strategy acknowledges gaps in the capacity of its provision and also identified that there are a lack services to address perpetrator behaviour. Their business plan offers some prospect of further service provision, but it is not clear how soon this will happen, and greater urgency is required to improve the experiences of the many children impacted. While children wait for specialist help, they still receive support from social workers, who complete direct work and safety planning with children in these circumstances. This helps to mitigate risk.
10. Good work by staff with parents and a strong partnership approach are leading to risks being reduced for children at risk of sexual exploitation. The Sexual Exploitation and Missing (SEAM) panel reviews high-risk cases and coordinates effectively intelligence sharing, as well as prevention and disruption activity. The child sexual exploitation 'EXIT' team is well managed and well resourced. It provides child-centred, relationship-based direct work, and responds to referrals promptly and effectively. Well-coordinated strategic arrangements for identifying, responding to and supporting children at risk

mean that children at risk of sexual exploitation are helped and risks are understood and managed.

11. Children who go missing are seen promptly. Return home interviews are mostly detailed, with useful intelligence to support future planning and risk management. This is done, for example, by identifying groups of children from specific schools, and providing targeted training and awareness-raising to reduce risk.
12. The response to contextual safeguarding concerns is a strength, with some creative and sensitive work being undertaken to protect children. When children are identified as being potentially at risk of female genital mutilation, forced marriage or radicalisation, their circumstances are assessed promptly, with proportionate, timely and effective multi-agency interventions successfully reducing risk. An example of good practice was seen in the securing of a forced marriage protection order for a child at risk, and targeted work to raise awareness of such safeguarding concerns in her school following this successful intervention.
13. There have been missed opportunities to provide some disabled children and their families with support earlier. When support is provided, children and parents have responded well and do benefit from help subsequently offered. Transition planning into adulthood does not start soon enough for some children with complex needs to provide the needed reassurance to children and families about future adult care and educational placement arrangements. This is something that senior leaders are addressing, and actions are well underway to ensure that planning for young people with complex needs starts earlier.

**The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers is good.**

14. Most children who become looked after in Bolton make progress and their outcomes improve as a result. Children who are identified as needing to be in care are swiftly assessed, with effective assessments and evidence-based decision-making. Effective pre-proceedings arrangements and comprehensive court documentation ensure that timely decisions are made for children in securing a plan for permanence through the court process.
15. For many children in care, their placements become long-term through the passage of time rather than by formal consideration, planning and decision-making. While this may not impact on the daily experiences of many children, some will not be formally assured of their permanent security. For some children in long-term foster care, consideration of special guardianship orders could be more actively pursued as a permanence option. In the small number

of cases when placements break down, there is insufficient scrutiny of the circumstances to ensure that lessons are learned for the future. In some cases where children are placed at home with their parents successfully, there are delays in progressing the discharge of orders. Senior leaders have already identified these issues as a priority and are now ensuring that practice is being improved by an increased focus on permanence and outcome-based planning for children.

16. Children in care benefit from good educational placements that are supported by the creative use of the pupil premium. Personal education plans are of good quality and are routinely reviewed and revised according to children's changing needs. The virtual school is well led, with ongoing dialogue with schools. Training is available for all stakeholders, promoting an inclusive model of provision, which contributes resources and support into schools. A school readiness project is being piloted for younger children, and early indicators are positive. This means that the educational progress of children in care is positive, particularly for those at primary stage.
17. Leaders have developed effective systems for assessing the risk of each child missing education, and they work well with other agencies to trace the whereabouts of missing children. The small number of children who are electively home educated are seen and supported appropriately by the dedicated worker.
18. The virtual school leads on participation and the coordination of work to celebrate the achievements of children in care. For example, the annual awards evening acts as a focal point to celebrate the individual and group achievements of children in care across the borough, and children highly value this event.
19. The Voice4U group of children in care is committed, articulate and passionate about a range of issues relating to children in care. Children in care and care leavers would welcome more participation opportunities, including wider social and group activities.
20. Health assessments are prioritised, routinely in place, and reviewed according to changing need. Care leavers have been involved in the development of the health summary document, and children now receive their full health summaries as they reach 16, meaning that they have a good understanding of their health history as they approach adulthood.
21. Foster carers are recruited, assessed and approved within appropriate timescales. Assessments are comprehensive and analytical, and consideration is given to the impact of fostering on the whole family. Connected carer assessments take account of both the potential carer's history and the needs of the children to be placed.

22. Recruitment of adoptive carers has been further strengthened since the formation of the regional adoption agency by dedicated specialist recruitment officers. Adopters are well prepared. They are given a good understanding of the needs of adopted children and the impact of early trauma. Experienced and skilful practitioners have a very good understanding of children's needs, and provide comprehensive advice and support packages for adoptive families. For children placed for adoption, stable and secure placements with their adoptive families ensure positive outcomes.
23. The use of residential care is appropriate, and children are safer because of being in their residential placement. Secure accommodation is used appropriately and effectively when it is needed. Where children need to be placed outside of the local authority area, appropriate placements are arranged.
24. Care leavers benefit from the strong corporate parenting ethos across the council, for example through the provision of travel and leisure passes, and exemption from council tax.
25. Care leavers receive good support from their social workers, multi-agency specialists and the virtual school to enable them to maximise their potential in accessing education, employment or training. Examples of creative support from the Looked After Supported Employment team have been seen, with some young people taken on as apprentices with the council.
26. Care leavers speak positively of their relationships with foster carers, and many care leavers are benefiting from 'staying put' with their carers as they move into adulthood.
27. Care leavers have access to a varied range of accommodation options, and all young people spoken to said that they were in safe and appropriate homes.
28. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who arrive in Bolton become looked after on assessment and are responded to sensitively. Prompt and appropriate holistic support plans are affording positive outcomes for these children.

**The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families is good.**

29. There is strong political and corporate support for children's services. This is ensuring that children's needs are prioritised in the council. The areas for improvement identified during the 2014 inspection have been systematically responded to and improvements have been made. Investment in services for children is prioritised by the council in the light of its own accurate self-assessment, in response to the issues they have correctly identified.

30. In addition to the lead member, a further elected member has the role of 'Children's and Corporate Parenting Champion', ensuring that children's voices influence wider council business. The annual children's vision conference doubles as a celebration event for the achievements of children in care and care leavers, and a consultation opportunity to ensure that children's views are actively engaged in service planning, for example in the re-commissioning of children and adolescent mental health services.
31. Senior leaders have a good and accurate understanding of the strengths and areas for development in its services for children. Appropriate plans are in place to address the areas for development. For example, residential and edge-of-care provision is being realigned in response to the growing care population and the increasing complexity of needs of the children in care. Also, additional resources are being deployed to enhance transitional arrangements for disabled children and those with complex needs, in preparation for adulthood. Further investment has been made in the independent reviewing officer service to support increased scrutiny and challenge. It is too soon yet to evaluate the impact of these developments.
32. Opportunities for learning are established and influence how services are developing. Learning from peer reviews, serious case reviews, audit and performance management is increasingly used by managers to ensure compliance and track the progress of work.
33. The experiences of children are not yet systematically captured through case file audits. Auditing of case files is well embedded, but is focused on ensuring compliance rather than the qualitative experiences of children and understanding what is making a positive difference to informing the development and improvement of services. Leaders have already identified this, and the audit tool and framework were in the process of being revised prior to this inspection. More could be learned from the aggregated analysis of thematic work being undertaken. For example, learning from the complaints made by children and families is underdeveloped.
34. The skill and experience of first line managers is recognised and highly valued by social workers, and is a key factor in contributing to the experienced and largely permanent workforce. There is a clear and comprehensive workforce development strategy, and all staff benefit from the opportunity to develop their knowledge, skills and careers in Bolton. This means that children and families benefit from long-term and trusting relationships with skilled and supportive social workers who understand their needs and how best to work with them to reduce risk and improve their outcomes.
35. Partnerships are well established across all agencies, at strategic and operational levels. Formal arrangements exist to challenge and develop relationships, leading to a shared and cohesive understanding of priorities and

actions. For example, the proposed Bolton Vulnerable People Strategic Board will join up the partnership approach to domestic abuse in response to the increasing numbers of children and adults whose experiences are adversely impacting on their progress. The review of early help services in partnership with the safeguarding board is now underway to better ensure that children's experiences are improved through early interventions. Strong relationships with the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service and the Local Family Justice Council are helping to ensure that children do not experience delays in securing permanence through adoption.

36. Bolton is hosting the Regional Adoption Agency (Adoption Now). The lead member for children's services actively leads on these arrangements, placing the local authority in a strong regional position.



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