

Bristol City of

Inspection of children's social care services

Inspection dates: 10 September 2018 to 21 September 2018

Lead inspector: Joy Howick
Her 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	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

Since the single inspection framework (SIF) inspection in 2014 and the joint area targeted inspection (JTAI) in 2017, services have improved substantially for care leavers, children in care and children in need of help and protection. Greater corporate ownership of and commitment to children services have resulted in strategic partnerships that are well developed and increasingly effective. Senior leaders, who are outward looking and innovative, have a good understanding of strengths and areas for improvement. They have made considerable progress in developing an environment in which good social work can flourish by changing the way in which services are delivered and significantly reducing social workers' workloads. While children, young people and families do not always currently get a good service, this is improving.

Practice improvements are most evident in a number of areas identified as weak in the most recent SIF inspection and the JTAI. Children identified as being at risk of immediate harm receive timely support and appropriate interventions. The vast majority of children in long-term foster care live in stable homes and make good progress. The local authority is in touch with virtually all of its care leavers, most

of whom receive a good level of support. Services for disabled children, which were previously an area of weakness, are now a strength. However, despite these tangible improvements, outcomes for children and young people at every stage of their contact with children's services are not yet uniformly good and some pockets of weaker practice remain.

What needs to improve

- The quality of strategy discussions, reviews and child in need meetings, including records of decision-making.
- The quality of analysis in assessments and plans so that they are explicit about the desired outcomes and the timescales for completion.
- The quality of case recording, including recording of management decision-making.
- The effectiveness of arrangements to secure a sufficiency of placements.
- The educational progress and achievement of children in care.
- The take-up of return home interviews for children who go missing from home.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection requires improvement to be good

1. Children and families in Bristol have the benefit of good-quality early help services. The three multi-disciplinary, locality-based families in focus teams deliver a comprehensive range of multi-agency interventions. Thresholds and referral pathways are well understood. While some families may have to wait for a service, those in greatest need are prioritised appropriately. The quality of help and support work provided is helping to avoid the need for statutory intervention by strengthening parenting capacity and building resilience. When children's needs change and risks increase, cases are promptly stepped up to children's social care.
2. The first response team (FRT) makes timely and appropriate decisions about children and young people in need of help and protection. Information is shared promptly, and thresholds are applied appropriately. Children who are identified as being at immediate risk of significant harm are promptly referred to the relevant locality social work unit. The quality of information provided by partners, though still variable, is improving. Parental consent is consistently secured. Effective partnership work has resulted in improved screening of domestic abuse incidents of children experiencing abuse and neglect. This was an area of concern identified in the JTAI which the local authority has successfully addressed.
3. However, senior managers have recognised that the timeliness of decision-making in the FRT about children with less urgent needs requires improvement to be good. They are increasing management capacity and have invested in new technology that makes it easier to monitor and track the progress of contacts and referrals. Consequently, the overall timeliness of decision-making is improving.

4. The emergency duty team, which is jointly commissioned with three other local authorities, provides an effective out-of-hours service. The help, support and protection that children and families receive during evenings and weekends is well informed by multi-agency decision-making that is timely and proportionate. Previously, at the time of the SIF inspection, strategy meetings were an area of weakness.
5. Strategy discussions are held promptly when concerns for children first arise. However, most discussions are held over the telephone and do not routinely involve those with direct first-hand experience of the child and their family. The way in which strategy meetings and discussions are recorded does not always provide a clear rationale for the decisions made or indicate who needs to do what and by when. Where detailed recording is absent, it is not always possible to ensure that actions can be easily tracked.
6. Timely child protection enquiries carefully consider the risks and needs of children. Children are spoken to, and social workers apply thresholds correctly. However, in a very small number of cases, actions taken to protect children do not fully take account of all past events. Although no child has been harmed as a result of this, inspectors concluded that a child protection enquiry should have been carried out sooner.
7. Most social workers know their children well, see them at regular intervals and use a variety of tools and techniques to sensitively explore the feelings of children and young people. Inspectors saw numerous examples of purposeful direct work that had led to a good understanding of children's lived experiences and had helped to inform interventions and plans.
8. The timeliness and quality of assessments have improved since the last inspection. Most assessments are comprehensive and reflect children's wishes and feelings, but not all provide a clear, succinct analysis to most effectively inform planning. The use of chronologies has improved, but historical issues are not always rigorously analysed. Social workers make good use of the local authority's preferred social work model in order to identify risks and protective factors. However, they do not always clearly analyse the specific impact of their experiences on individual children in the same family group.
9. Social workers and managers do not always recognise the importance of repeated patterns of historic behaviour and significant worrying events for older children. Missed opportunities to intervene sooner resulted in a small number of older children being left in situations of neglect for too long. In some cases, this resulted in them being admitted to care in an emergency, with police involvement.
10. The quality of written child in need and child protection plans is too variable. Although there is evidence of social work practice that is increasingly purposeful and effective, with some examples of very good plans, plans do not

always make it clear who is going to do what by when or why. Very few plans include an explicit contingency plan. This makes it difficult for parents and others to understand what is expected of them or what will happen if change is not achieved.

11. Most initial and review child protection conferences, core groups and child in need meetings are well attended by partner agencies. Information is shared effectively. While the quality of child protection plans is variable, more recent child protection conferences demonstrate a sharper focus on addressing the aspects of children's experiences that make the most difference to them. Advocacy for children in need of help and protection is available from a commissioned service, but is not routinely taken up, limiting how children's views are presented at the conference.
12. Multi-agency risk assessment conferences are well attended and effective. The information shared is used well to identify risks to adults and children and for those attending to agree on clear actions, with timescales designed to safeguard and support the victim.
13. The local authority's designated officer is effective in ensuring that allegations against adults in a position of trust result in prompt and appropriate action to safeguard and protect children. In the designated officer's absence, thresholds are not always consistently applied. The designated officer promptly reviews any decisions made, taking remedial action if needed, and inspectors did not see any examples of children and young people being exposed unnecessarily to risk as a result of these inconsistencies. However, senior managers acknowledge that they need to strengthen cover arrangements.
14. The newly configured social work teams provide an effective environment for social workers to build meaningful relationships with children and young people. Social workers value both the availability of managers sitting in close proximity to them and 'mapping meetings', which provide timely management oversight and reflection on practice. However, this management oversight is not well captured in supervision records. This makes it difficult to track decision-making and measure progress for children.
15. The quality of recording on children's files is not yet good. While social workers can describe the work that they do with children well, there is too much variability in how this is captured in case records. In particular, diversity issues are not always sufficiently recognised or addressed.
16. The disabled children service, which includes family support and inclusion teams, has recently been reconfigured. Services for disabled children, which were previously a weakness, are now a strength. Social workers routinely consider the needs of all family members, including parents with special needs and non-disabled brothers and sisters. Social workers know their children well and make effective use of different tools and techniques to communicate with children, and gather children's thoughts, wishes and feelings. Assessments,

which are regularly updated, are used well to deliver bespoke packages of support.

17. Children who are privately fostered receive a thorough and timely assessment of need.
18. The needs of young people who present as homeless and who are accommodated are thoroughly assessed. Currently, records of all young people who present as homeless are not easily accessible and the local authority does not check the accuracy of decision-making for those young people who have not been accommodated. Consequently, the local authority cannot be assured that all young people who present as homeless receive an appropriate level of support and intervention.
19. The vast majority of children who go missing from home or care are promptly offered a return home interview (RHI). Case records include a comprehensive summary of episodes of children going missing. Inspectors saw good examples of RHIs that were clear, appropriately detailed and shared with the police missing person coordinator who is based at the 'front door'. This is helping to safeguard and protect individual children and strengthen local intelligence about push and pull factors. However, the take-up of RHIs by children who go missing from home is low. The local authority and its partners have issued new practice guidance to increase the take-up of RHIs by young people. This guidance incorporates advice of the national working group, as well as learning from a diagnostic review undertaken with young people. However, it is too soon to evaluate the impact of the new 'trusted relationship' model, which offers greater choice and flexibility about who is best placed to carry out the RHI.
20. There are good systems in place to identify and monitor children who are electively home educated (EHE) and children missing from education. The local authority has a monthly meeting that is effective in reducing the number of children missing education. The local authority issues schools with detailed guidance on EHE. Schools use clear pathways to notify any concerns, and these are acted on appropriately.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers requires improvement to be good

21. Social workers and managers make appropriate decisions when children need to come into care.
22. When social workers and managers make the decision that legal proceedings will be necessary if children's circumstances do not improve, letters before proceedings are succinct and written in plain English. This enables parents to understand the concerns. However, letters do not always include what has been done to assist parents and children, what further support they will receive

and timescales for positive change. As a result, parents may not always fully understand what is expected of them and within what timescale it is expected.

23. For children in care, the quality of assessments is variable. Some are good, while others are too descriptive and not sufficiently analytical. In weaker assessments, effective planning is hampered as problems are not defined well enough to ensure that the right help is provided.
24. Assessments of children in care proceedings are of a consistently good quality. This has been recognised by the local judiciary and Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS). Social workers provide good, detailed assessments, including viability assessments, to test the suitability of alternative carers and connected carers and special guardians' assessments. For these children, decisions are made promptly, so that they can live with people they know, and who understand their needs. Appropriate support plans sustain and strengthen these caring arrangements.
25. Children's care plans are of variable quality. Some are specific and clear, but a small minority do not include the child's wishes, clear actions with timescales or realistic contingency plans. As a consequence, for these children, social work practice is too reactive. Better care plans are accessible and meaningful for children. Social workers produce plans in colourful and creative ways that recognise the achievements that are important to children.
26. Through the 'Thinking Allowed' and the 'Treatment Foster Care Oregon' projects, the CAMHS team for children looked after provides good access to primary healthcare and good therapeutic services to support children's emotional health and well-being. These initiatives provide timely, high-quality interventions that support children in their placements effectively.
27. Children are seen regularly, according to their level of need, by their social workers. This includes those children placed out of area. The quality of recording of these home visits by social workers is mostly thorough, but some records lack depth and analysis of events. Children are routinely seen alone. However, although social workers are actively engaged in doing direct work with children, this was not always clearly evident from the children's files.
28. When, after a prolonged period in care, the decision is made to reunite children with their birth families, the reunification process is carefully planned and well managed. Comprehensive parenting assessments help to ensure that such decisions are made safely and in the best interests of the child.
29. Children are actively encouraged to, and do, attend their reviews. Advocacy is used appropriately. The quality of reviews is good. Minutes are written directly to the child, giving the feeling of a personalised letter. These minutes acknowledge the child's wishes and explain in child-friendly language the outcomes and decisions of their review. The workloads of independent reviewing officers (IROs) are now manageable and the level of oversight of

practice and challenge they provide has improved significantly since the last inspection.

30. Children seen during the inspection were living in appropriate placements that met their needs with evidence of improved outcomes. However, despite clear action planning to recruit foster carers to meet the specific needs of children in care and an on-going marketing programme, the local authority does not have enough foster carers to meet children's needs. Due to a lack of suitable placement choice, careful matching is not always possible when children first become looked after or when changing placements. As a result, some children live in bridging placements while a suitable match is sought.
31. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are well supported, based on a clear assessment of their needs, and are placed in suitable accommodation without delay.
32. When adoption is the plan for children, they receive an effective and timely service. Social workers carefully consider the individual needs of brothers and sisters. Children's permanence reports are thorough. Contact arrangements are thoughtful and well managed. Family-finding and matching are effective for these children who achieve permanence without delay. Foster-to-adopt is always considered in order to promote early attachments and avoid delay in children achieving permanence. Post-adoption support, including for special guardians, is effective in supporting children and their carers.
33. For some children, where adoption is not the permanence plan, there is delay in achieving permanence within the child's timescales, and some long-term foster placements have not yet been formally confirmed as children's permanent home.
34. Assessments of prospective foster carers are thorough and comprehensive, and give a clear recommendation to the fostering panel. The fostering panel is effective and makes timely and appropriate recommendations.
35. Training for foster carers has recently been updated. However, some foster carers spoken to during this inspection told inspectors that they do not always receive sufficient training, support, or all the relevant information about the child for whom they are caring.
36. The virtual school does not currently pay sufficient attention to the progress that pupils make from their starting points, including from the moment they enter care and join the virtual school. This limits the effectiveness of any evaluation of the contribution that going into care makes to improving pupils' education. The attainment and progress of children looked after are inconsistent across the key stages. In key stage 1, for example, there is a trend of year-on-year improvement in attainment of the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics. However, in other key stages, outcomes are

weaker, especially in key stage 4, where children looked after make poor progress.

37. The quality of personal education plans (PEPs) has improved significantly since the last inspection. At their best, the PEPs are of very high quality, reflecting the concerted effort made by the virtual head to drive up standards. The virtual school head manages the use of pupil premium well through the PEPs. Funding is only released once effective provision, targeted clearly at improving the outcomes, is identified by the school.
38. Services for care leavers have improved significantly since the last inspection, when the service was judged to be inadequate. Most care leavers experience continuity of support and have personal advisers who know them well. Professionals work together effectively to keep care leavers safe and reduce risk, but this is not always well reflected in written plans. The quality of pathway plans is too variable, some are very good but others are not aspirational or ambitious enough. The majority provide a clear summary of young people's strengths, needs and vulnerabilities and reflect their wishes and feelings, but actions are rarely specific or measurable.
39. Young people do not always feel well prepared for independence. Care leavers told inspectors that it largely depends on where, and with whom, they live. Currently, the local authority does not have a set of consistent standards, with strategic oversight, that ensures that all young people develop the skills they need to be able to live independently. While the percentage of care leavers in education, employment and training is higher than averages for care leavers nationally at 56%, it does not yet meet the local authority's aspirations for its young people. There is insufficient take-up by care leavers of the opportunities offered. Therefore, their ability to reach their potential is limited.
40. Most care leavers live in appropriate accommodation and get good-quality information about their rights and entitlement. However, too many do not understand their health history and its implications for their future or have good access to specialist health services when they need them. Care leavers told inspectors that 'staying-put' arrangements for them to remain living with their former foster carers after their 18th birthdays are freely available. Since the SIF inspection in 2014, the percentage of care leavers who benefit from the additional support and continuity that these arrangements provide has doubled.

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

41. Since the SIF inspection in 2014 and the more recent JTAI in 2017, incremental improvements are clearly evident in the quality of social work practice and in the services provided to vulnerable children and their families. The local

authority has committed significant inward investment, and has realigned services, and this, allied to a willingness to innovate, is starting to make a positive difference.

42. There is now greater corporate ownership of services for children and young people. The local authority and its partners are sharply focused on the 'strengthening families' transformation programme which has led to improvements in collaborative and partnership working. During the inspection, inspectors saw strong joint working across services. The local authority's strategic partnerships with schools, the police, child and mental health services, CAF/CASS and the local judiciary are strong and increasingly effective.
43. The local authority's self-assessment is realistic. Senior leaders know that there is still some way to go to 'get to good' across all areas of practice and performance. The local authority, with partners, has ensured that the quality of services for the most vulnerable children has improved. For example, leaders have ensured fundamental improvements for disabled children, and the quality of support to care leavers, an area of inadequacy at the last inspection, is significantly improved.
44. Senior leaders have taken decisive action to reduce caseloads. Over the course of the last 12 months, average caseloads have fallen markedly. Increasingly, staff have the time and capacity to deliver purposeful and well-targeted interventions. This is partly due to an increase in staffing establishment at key pressure points. This means that staff are now better placed to ensure that children and families make progress and experience better outcomes.
45. The local authority ensures that the views of children and young people influence how services are delivered. Elected members provide effective critical challenge to the DCS and her team. The Bristol corporate parenting strategy and the Bristol Pledge to all children in care and care leavers, developed in collaboration with children in care, are visible and accessible for children and young people, with clear targets and actions that are tracked within the corporate parenting panel. The corporate parenting panel's strategic priorities are fully aligned with the critical areas that improve the lives of children. The minutes of this corporate parent panel demonstrate an effective level of critical challenge to the local authority.
46. Operation Topaz, which shares information and intelligence effectively in order to identify more hidden children and young people at risk of criminal and/or sexual exploitation, has raised the awareness of the local authority, along with that of partner agencies, of the dangers of criminal and sexual exploitation. The 'Think Family' database, shared between children's social care, the safeguarding education team, the youth offending service and the police, has led to considerable success in disrupting the activity of perpetrators.
47. Strategies, including the preventing gang involvement and youth violence children and young people strategy, are well developed, and there are

appropriate reporting arrangements in place. Where appropriate, child protection procedures, including complex strategy meetings, are used effectively to safeguard and protect children and young people. Young people themselves are able to access a good range of services, including sexual health services, according to the level of assessed risk. However, the child sexual exploitation risk assessment is not consistently well used for individual children.

48. Action taken by senior leaders has led to a gradual increase in the number of teenage foster placements, while at the same time reducing the number of 16- and 17-year-olds entering care for the first time. Additionally, the establishment of a specialist kinship care team has strengthened the support for connected persons and helped to increase the number of children who are now the subject of a special guardianship order. The local authority is in the process of re-profiling its own children's homes to better meet the needs of a changing care population. While the overwhelming majority of children in care are living with foster carers and long-term placement stability is generally better than the national average, sufficiency is still a challenge. This is reflected in the fact that the percentage of children and young people placed more than 20 miles from home has increased.
49. The local authority has a clear commitment to continuous improvement. Senior leaders have taken on board, and have acted on, the key messages from the JTAI and a subsequent peer review. These messages include improving the use of the model of social work practice and re-designing the front door so that it is effective and is improving the response to older children subject to neglect.
50. Through a combination of robust reporting arrangements, better quality data and a rigorous focus on those issues and areas that make the most difference, senior leaders are systematically using data to increase their, and their managers', grip on practice and performance. This has led to discernible improvements across a range of metrics, including, for example, the timeliness of social work assessments, the frequency and regularity of social work visits, the timely completion of health assessments and dental checks, and the review of strengths and difficulties questionnaires, although there is still some way to go. A new suite of reports has been developed which make data easier to see, understand and digest, and is being rolled out across children's social care services, starting with early help. The next step is to replace the monthly management reports, which, in their current form, are of limited value.
51. The local authority has used the learning from its audit activity to improve the quality and availability of chronologies and the way in which children's wishes and feelings are captured, recorded and used to shape and inform assessments and plans. However, to date, senior leaders have not been able to achieve the same level of progress with their other key priorities, such as with the quality of assessments, plans and recording of management oversight.
52. Key to the progress that the local authority has made is the introduction of discrete social work units with good supervisory ratios and dedicated

administrative support. This helps to ensure that staff feel safe and supported, provides a virtual team around the child and offers greater consistency when case accountable workers are absent. The local authority's adoption of its preferred method of social work, which, during the JTAI 10 months ago was described as 'mechanistic', is now being used to much greater effect.

53. Allied to the work done by senior leaders on recruitment, retention and workforce development, these initiatives have helped to achieve a more stable workforce. The rate of staff turnover has fallen, as has the local authority's reliance on agency workers. Newly qualified social workers now have protected caseload numbers and they told inspectors that they felt well supported during their assisted and supported year in employment. Staff morale is good.



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