

London Borough of Bromley

Inspection of children’s social care services

Inspection dates: 19 November–30 November 2018

Lead inspector: Dawn Godfrey, Her 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	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Since the last inspection in 2016, when children’s services were judged to be inadequate, there has been a new and highly experienced senior leadership team which has driven a rapid and sustained pace of improvement, supported by a whole-council investment in children’s services. This has led to vastly improved services for children and families. The executive director and his team, together with strong corporate support from members, have ensured an unwavering focus on continuous improvement. Staff at every level have high aspirations for the children who receive services in Bromley.

Children who need help and protection receive good-quality help and support. Early help and family support services are highly effective. Workers are skilled and creative, ensuring that children are at the heart of assessments and plans. This leads to dynamic and proportionate plans, and interventions that improve outcomes. Children in care receive a good service from workers and carers, who ‘go the extra mile’ to support their needs. They know their children well and have trusting relationships. Care leavers have access to a good range of suitable accommodation, and staff are ambitious for their success.

What needs to improve

- The take-up of return home interviews and the effective use of information to identify and mitigate emerging risks.
- Information provided to homeless 16- and 17-year-olds so that they understand the options available to them.
- School attendance levels and educational progress for secondary-aged children in care.
- The arrangements for care leavers to have access to their health history, and support to care leavers to develop emotional resilience.

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

1. Children in need of help and protection in Bromley now receive a timely and effective response. Extensive work by senior managers on improving partners' understanding of thresholds and the management of referrals means that children who are at risk of harm are swiftly identified and protected.
2. The comprehensive early help offer is a significant strength. Early help services were found to be effective in 2016 and have been strengthened further since that time. The early intervention and family support service (EIFS) is underpinned and supported by senior commitment, a coherent strategy and an annual commissioning process. It provides an impressive preventative service for children and their families that successfully reduces the need for statutory intervention. The EIFS service is exceptionally well managed by a dynamic head of service, who oversees and maintains an impressive balance of strategic planning, quality assurance, and staff and service development. Staff are skilled, enthusiastic and child focused; they have a strong understanding of local need and are adept at engaging with families. They provide excellent support services, while being alert to safeguarding issues that may require additional intervention. Successful outcomes for children are demonstrated by the low rate of repeat referrals (almost all families need only one or two cycles of support), as well as the feedback from families, which is sought after each activity.
3. The multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) has been established for some time, with good engagement by partner agencies. Thresholds and referral routes are well understood by all partners. Partner agencies contribute effectively to decision-making in the MASH by promptly responding to referrals which do not meet the social care threshold. Information is shared in a timely way and consent for sharing information, when appropriate, is

explicit on children's files. Highly efficient systems mean that no referrals or work are missed, and there is an attention to detail that is evident throughout the decision-making process. Meaningful information-sharing means that risk assessments are dynamic and help staff to determine the action to take. Staff demonstrate a professional curiosity, which means that wider needs and risks are considered, in addition to the presenting issues. Families with disabled children are able to benefit from an online assessment, allowing them to identify their needs and indicate how those needs might be met. This accessible and transparent process means that families receive services swiftly.

4. The out-of-hours service has greatly improved since the last inspection. Increased resources in relation to adult mental health provision have released social work capacity to provide a more timely, effective response to children and their families. Effective handover arrangements, aided by the daily MASH meeting, mean that children and families experience a seamless service and receive a prompt response to out-of-hours issues.
5. Children in need of protection now receive a timely and comprehensive analysis of risk through multi-agency strategy discussions and child protection enquiries, which routinely include police, health and education representatives. Immediate safety plans are clear; these include interventions and services to support families while investigations take place, reducing risk at an early stage.
6. Children benefit from assessments that include good consideration and engagement of parents and extended family, even those at a distance. Assessments demonstrate good understanding of the people who are important in a child's life. The individual needs of brothers and sisters are clearly identified and addressed, and issues relating to identity are well understood; they inform assessment and planning as a matter of routine, including how workers will engage and work with the child and family. This means that children's needs are understood and planned for and that social workers are better able to form a trusting relationship.
7. Homeless 16- and 17-year-olds are provided swiftly with temporary accommodation while a social work assessment takes place, and there is no use of bed and breakfast accommodation. However, assessments for this group of young people are not always explicit about becoming looked after, meaning that young people may not always be fully aware of their options and helped to make well-informed decisions.
8. Direct work with children has become a significant strength in Bromley. Many different tools are used to elicit children's wishes and feelings, complemented by reflective observations by social workers that pick up on non-verbal cues. Children's voices and experiences sing out in their assessments and plans, and social workers give priority to forming strong,

trusting relationships. This enables children to participate meaningfully and to influence their planning.

9. Effective action has been taken to improve the quality of children's plans. Plans are outcome-focused and succinct, and they are specific about what needs to happen and by when. Contingencies are clear and are established early on in the plan, to ensure that they are in place if required. Multi-agency and family networks are used effectively to ensure that children are given the best chance to improve their life experiences. Plans are reviewed regularly, and with rigour, through a range of multi-agency review activities, including panels and conferences. This means that plans are dynamic and they are updated as a child's needs or risks change. As a result, in most cases risks reduce and plans do not drift.
10. Since the last inspection, management oversight and supervision have become routine and embedded. They are threaded through case work and provide clear, directive and purposeful guidance to social workers as risks change. This framework of practice enables social workers to grow in confidence; it means that they are clear about actions and they progress work well.
11. The work of the designated officer is a considerable strength. The designated officer shows excellent attention to the broad range of tasks in her role and tracks all actions, timescales and outcomes effectively to ensure that referrals are responded to promptly and clearly.
12. Vulnerable adolescents now receive a good service. The Atlas team, a joint enterprise between children's social care and the police, launched in 2017, and the new 'missing, exploitation and gang affiliation' panel are highly effective, providing valuable safety planning and risk assessment for children at high risk. Partners are committed, actions are completed in a timely way and wider contextual safeguarding knowledge is shared. This demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of safeguarding responsibilities regarding other children and young people. It also means that young people's networks and associations are well known and that changing associations or previous associations are taken into consideration, resulting in more effective management of risk and vulnerability.
13. Return home interviews are routinely offered to children who go missing from home or care, but take-up has stalled. Persistent efforts are made to engage young people, and when return home interviews do take place, particularly for children at the highest risk, high-quality and important information is gained and shared. This benefits wider safety planning and the identification of other vulnerable children.
14. The management and oversight of elective home education are good. Tight, well-established systems are in place and the experienced and

tenacious team takes appropriate action if there are safeguarding concerns or if the education provision is unsuitable. Professionals act quickly and determinedly to follow up any concerns about children who are out of education. Joint work with primary schools has had a very positive impact on reducing the number of permanent exclusions. The local authority has rightly identified the need to have a similar focus on permanent exclusions from secondary schools and the importance of exploring appropriate alternatives.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers are: good

15. Timely and well-considered decisions are made when children need to come into care. All decisions for children to come into care are based on comprehensive, balanced and child-centred assessments which take into account the views of other professionals as well as children and their families. When risks increase, and children are no longer able to live safely at home, statutory powers are used appropriately to safeguard and protect them. The Public Law Outline is used well, and realistic timescales are set for parents to demonstrate progress. Plans are regularly reviewed to avoid drift. Effective support is in place that reduces risk for children when parents are engaging well, but decisive action is taken when there is a failure to improve within a child's timescales. Social work evidence for care proceedings is robust, and a range of assessments and casework tools are used to inform analysis. Well-considered alternatives are presented in detail, and contingency planning runs concurrently, reducing delay for children.
16. Social workers visit children in care very regularly and in accordance with their presenting risks and needs. Children are routinely seen alone and the direct work with them is clearly taken into account in assessments and plans. Children are actively encouraged to attend their reviews, and advocacy is always offered and used appropriately. Social workers maintain logs about children's histories and use these to help children to understand their early life experiences and to build positive relationships with them. This is particularly important when a child experiences a change in social worker, as it reduces the need for them to repeat their story. Inspectors saw many excellent examples of life-story work and later-life letters.
17. The Living in Care Council (LinCC), composed of representatives of children in care, is well established and supported. LinCC is a strong advocate for children in care in Bromley and the annual residential training event is a wonderful example of how children in care are helped to embrace change and to understand their role as LinCC members. Achievements of children in care are celebrated and there is active involvement with children placed at a distance in order to encourage participation. Care leavers are now represented separately through the care leavers' forum and they are

already shining a spotlight on key issues for care leavers, such as council tax exemption.

18. Children in care live in appropriate placements, they have their needs met and they develop well. There is evidence of their outcomes improving because of the care that they receive. Placement matching is of good quality, but for a very small number of children with more complex needs who need to change placement, planning can be reactive rather than proactive due to the limited range of placements available, resulting in multiple moves.
19. Assessments and plans for children in care are routinely updated and reflect changes in children's circumstances. They are insightful regarding risks and barriers to progress, and action to address these is taken swiftly. In stronger examples, care plans are clearly directed by children's views and cover all aspects of a child's life, including leisure activities and interests, which are actively encouraged. Arrangements for spending time with birth families are sensitively considered and timely. Inspectors saw some lovely examples of creative ways to improve the quality of the time that children spend with their families.
20. The quality of looked after reviews has improved markedly since the last inspection. There is now an embedded, timely system in place, and this is enhanced by independent reviewing officers visiting children between reviews, helping children to participate meaningfully and to influence the decision-making about their future. Review notes are written directly to the child and demonstrate genuine warmth and care.
21. Children in care are helped to improve their health. The children in care health team ensures that health assessments are comprehensive, they identify all health needs and are actively followed up to ensure that these needs are met. This service includes children who live out of area and at a distance. A range of resources is available in one location, enabling easy access. For care leavers, current health needs are known and met. However, some care leavers are not aware of their health histories and do not have access to them.
22. Children's emotional and mental health needs are well understood and met. Dedicated workers in the child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) use information from strengths and difficulties questionnaires effectively to inform planning and to monitor progress. This work is enhanced by the service offered by 'Bromley Y', a community well-being service which offers a single point of access for CAMHS services, including care leavers who would not reach the threshold for adult mental health services. There remains a challenge regarding access to mental health services for children who require specialist multi-disciplinary services for complex disorders. However, Bromley has recently made a successful bid

to become a 'mental health support teams' trailblazer. This initiative is designed to further improve children's access to mental health support by creating a seamless CAMHS service that covers children and young people from birth to 25 years of age.

23. The virtual school team is effective in its work with children. Children in early years and primary schools make very good progress in their learning, particularly in reading and mathematics. Team members use personal education plans particularly well to ensure a smooth transition between the stages of education, from early years through to post-16. Professionals adopt a range of creative strategies and approaches to ensure that individual children get the right provision and timely support when needed. Improved personal education plans and better tracking of post-16 young people enable the team members to have an accurate picture of children and young people's progress. However, attendance levels and educational progress for some secondary-aged children are not yet good. Team members, working with a range of professionals, have sharpened the focus on earlier intervention. They have tailored support to ensure that more young people have the skills and abilities to sustain their education or employment post-16, and that a higher proportion of 19- to 21-year-olds access and remain in education, employment, apprenticeships or other training.
24. Children receive high-quality care from their foster carers, who are assessed and supported effectively. Support for foster carers is an area of strength that is highly valued by carers, including connected person carers and special guardians. This enables carers to feel prepared to take on the needs and challenges of the children and young people in their care. Ongoing training is adapted and modified to meet the needs of the children and young people and in response to carers' feedback. Attracting a wide range of suitable carers to reflect the needs of children in care continues to be a challenge to managers, but application conversion rates have increased from 2% to 11% following a well-targeted advertising campaign.
25. Permanence planning is understood and pursued with rigour. Family finding and matching for permanence are strengths. Children benefit from the right permanence option for them that meets their needs, and the importance of long-term stability is fully acknowledged. When the permanence decision is for adoption, this is achieved in a timely manner. Early permanence (foster to adopt) is always considered as an option for a child and an effective family finding system supports children to achieve permanence without delay. Children's permanence reports are thorough and well evidenced, and include good consideration of alternatives to adoption, contact, and brother and sister assessments, if appropriate.
26. Effective adoption services result in well-assessed and prepared adoptive families. Prospective adopters benefit from flexibly arranged training, which

changes according to feedback and emerging themes. For second-time adopters, there is consideration of more bespoke training, focused on the needs of existing children, and parenting brothers and sisters. This results in well-prepared adoptive families who have access to excellent adoption support.

27. Care leavers benefit from trusting relationships with social workers and young persons' advisers who know them well. Young people are prepared well for the practical elements of independent living. However, work with vulnerable care leavers on developing the emotional resilience needed for living alone is not as strong. Pathway plans are mostly up to date. They cover all dimensions of a young person's needs, with a real sense of who the young person is and their aspirations. However, plans are not always updated following significant changes to young people's circumstances, for example entry into custody. Care leavers have access to a range of suitable accommodation, with timely consideration of options, including 'staying put'. This provides care leavers with certainty of accommodation as early as possible. Pre-release accommodation planning takes place at an early stage so that the small number of care leavers in custody are well prepared for release.
28. The proportion of care leavers who are in education, employment or training (EET) is improving and compares positively with statistical neighbours and the national average. This is a result of concerted efforts by a specialist worker and others in the leaving care service to provide tailored and creative support with a focus on helping care leavers into suitable opportunities. Staff are ambitious for care leavers, and those care leavers who are not in EET are considered at the fortnightly EET panel. The panel is attended by representatives from a broad range of relevant organisations. This has expanded the range of options available, now including coaching and access to apprenticeships in the Department of Work and Pensions.
29. Care leavers receive a 'sorted and supported' booklet which outlines all of the support and services that they can expect and have access to when they leave care. They understand their rights and are provided with the key documents needed to start their lives successfully as young adults.

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

30. Services for children and families in Bromley have improved dramatically since the last inspection, driven by the vision, commitment and determination of senior leaders. All of the recommendations from the previous inspection have been tackled with vigour. There has been a significant shift in political and corporate support for children's services, underpinned by sustained investment. The rapid improvement since the

last inspection continues unabated. Effective action has been taken concurrently across all areas of service and there is an unwavering focus on continuous improvement, with high aspirations for all children. The lead member for children's services is also the deputy leader of the council, a deliberate decision to ensure that children are front and centre throughout corporate and strategic planning. This is further enhanced by the executive director, ensuring, through his leadership of wider services, that cross-departmental issues and decisions are underpinned by a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of need, meaning that children are supported as they move into adulthood.

31. Partner engagement has been re-invigorated by the chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board, who is determined and ambitious for children, and who has a proven track record in working collaboratively to improve children's services. A range of apps have been developed by the board to assist partners' understanding of key issues, risks and how to respond effectively, and these are having a positive impact on the quality of information-sharing and collaboration with children's social care. Representatives from Cafcass and the judiciary told inspectors that excellent communication and vastly improved practice since the last inspection mean that issues are now dealt with as soon as they arise, and this has reduced the need for lengthy proceedings.
32. Senior managers have a detailed knowledge of their services and the local community. Commissioning arrangements have been completely restructured since the last inspection, recognising the importance of integrated commissioning in meeting the needs of complex and vulnerable children and young people. This has resulted in swift and better informed joint commissioning, and a strategy based on a comprehensive understanding of local need. Placement sufficiency and need are well understood and result in effective plans. Managers recognise the necessity for a more diverse range of carers to meet the needs of children in care, and to address the rising number of children placed out of borough and at a distance. The local authority is also planning for two residential units in the borough, specifically for children with complex needs, in order to facilitate a return to their 'home' environment.
33. The local authority is now a highly committed corporate parent. Elected members have all received training about their role and the qualities of a corporate parent. This is strengthened by co-chairing of the corporate parenting panel by members of LinCC, and a corporate parenting fun day which is highly valued by children in care. The improvements since the last inspection are palpable. Children in care representatives told inspectors that one of the best things about being in care in Bromley is that 'they are known' and that there is a 'huge' difference now in how much they feel valued.

34. Highly effective quality assurance arrangements drive a cycle of continuous improvement in practice, and there is now a strong focus on outcomes and child-centred social work. This has been strengthened by the commissioning of a service improvement team, which has taken a whole-system approach to quality assurance, including activity at individual, team and service levels. The governance of these arrangements sits with the executive director, ensuring that there is a golden thread of accountability and knowledge which aids accurate self-assessment.
35. Performance information has substantially improved since the last inspection and it can now be relied on to help leaders and managers to identify and understand important areas of risk and to prioritise actions. Senior leaders, including the chief executive and lead member, have a clear understanding of frontline practice and they interrogate performance information effectively in order to continue to improve. The use of performance information is embedded throughout children's services and is accessible to all managers. Improved accountability means that there is sharp analysis and challenge, ensuring that issues are tackled as they arise.
36. There is a sustained focus on increasing stability and capacity in the workforce. The 'Bromley promise' sets out the vision and pledge to staff about what they can expect from the organisation. The promise is being actively delivered and is known and valued by staff. It has proved integral to attracting new staff and retaining existing ones, resulting in a high percentage of permanent staff at the time of inspection. Senior managers have created a culture of high challenge and high support, enabling staff to be confident in their work, and this results in children experiencing good-quality social work and improved outcomes.
37. Senior managers and leaders actively listen to residents and service users and use feedback to improve services. This learning culture is enhanced by the social work practice advisory group, which provides an important direct line of communication for staff, from frontline staff to senior managers, raising key issues that affect them. This ensures quick identification of any issues arising and results in rapid resolution of concerns.
38. Senior leaders have created an outward-facing organisation that embraces innovation and practice in order to enhance its work with children. Staff who spoke to inspectors are inspired by their leaders and managers and believe in Bromley's vision and ambition. This is making a profound difference to improving the lives of children in Bromley.



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