

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
Textphone 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/ofsted



16 August 2021

Grainne Siggins
Executive Director, People Directorate
Bracknell Forest Council
Time Square
Market Street
Bracknell
Berks
RG12 1JD

Dear Ms Siggins

Focused visit to Bracknell Forest children's services

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic.

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Bracknell Forest children's services on 7 and 8 July 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Amanda Maxwell and Nick Stacey.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need and children subject to a child protection plan.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. However, the delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. The lead inspector and the director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19. This visit was carried out fully by remote means. The inspectors used video calls for discussions with local authority staff, managers and leaders.

Headline findings

The senior leadership team in Bracknell Forest children's services has undergone a number of changes in the past year. The previous director of children's services departed in August 2020. Until the recent appointment of the executive director of people, the assistant director of children's social care operations and the assistant director of education and learning have shared the responsibility for and oversight of the delivery of children's services. Together, they have continued to ensure the delivery of high-quality social work practice that has a positive impact on children's

experiences. Corporate leaders within the council have been well sighted on the progress of children, including disabled children, during this time. Effective and responsive partnership work has resulted in sound strategic oversight which permeates through to frontline managers and social workers within children's services.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The effectiveness of interventions when working with parents who are resistant to change.

Main findings

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic the local authority swiftly implemented a clear whole-organisation strategic plan and well-coordinated multi-agency response. This has ensured a consistent response to and delivery of services to children throughout the pandemic. The oversight and consideration of risk through the local philosophy of a 'safety first' approach has helped the partnership to have an appropriate focus on supporting the most vulnerable children.

Implementation of the chosen social work model provides a collegiate, holistic and dynamic practice environment, allowing social workers to make quick inroads into addressing long-standing parental issues which impact on the experiences and progress of children. When parents engage well with workers, the outcomes for children are positive and their circumstances improve in a timely way. However, when parents are resistant to change, ineffective decision-making can lead to repeated cycles of planning and interventions. As a result, a small number of children have continued to live in situations of neglect for too long without sustained improvements in their circumstances. When concerns about children reduce, plans to further address need and improve their circumstances are not always clear.

Frequent face-to-face visits to children enable social workers to gain a good understanding and insight into their views and lived experiences. Direct work with both children and parents is skilled and tailored to their specific needs and life experiences. The recent use of 'All about me' workbooks provides workers with a good initial insight into children's worlds, backgrounds, likes and dislikes.

The majority of children's assessments are detailed and coherent, and consider individual needs, experiences, vulnerabilities and risks. They contain clear analysis and evaluation through detailed exploration of the multiple factors that are having an impact on the quality of parenting. Social workers access a range of specialist workers and assessments which provide a holistic overview of parental capacity to make and sustain change. Parenting assessments completed by workers in the edge-of-care team are thorough in their exploration of risk, vulnerabilities and strengths of parents and potential family carers to meet the needs of children.

The vast majority of child protection meetings, such as strategy discussions, child protection conferences, reviews and core groups are well attended by professionals. They contribute effectively to child-focused, dynamic and purposeful planning which progresses work quickly and improves children's circumstances. Meetings are well recorded and demonstrate strong multi-agency and parental involvement, and the majority of records clearly evidence the rationale for next steps. Thresholds are understood and consistently applied. However, for some children, their circumstances do not improve quickly enough. In these cases, there is a lack of robustness and urgency to ensure identified risk is swiftly addressed.

The majority of children's plans are detailed, with clear outcomes and actions, and timescales by which these are to be achieved. Work with children is well targeted, achieving early, tangible improvements in children's lives. While a small number of children in need are allocated to family support workers, there is close and effective oversight of key decision-making points, assessments and reviews by qualified social workers.

The local authority's chosen social work model is well established and embedded across children's services. Social workers use the model effectively to engage parents in highly impactful work on domestic abuse and relationships. Careful attention is paid to successfully engage abusive male partners and fathers in perpetrator work, involving probation and other professionals appropriately. Mental health workers engage with parents quickly to assess and support as necessary, facilitating referrals to more specialist agencies if needed. Sensitive direct work with children captures and responds to their worries and fears about living with abusive adults.

Work undertaken with older children exposed to contextual safeguarding risks or at risk of family breakdown is thoughtful, skilled and impactful. A range of workers are available to address specific issues, such as substance misuse by young people or school attendance. Highly focused and tailored interventions address risks to children and their needs, reducing the likelihood of them entering care.

Pre-proceedings work, undertaken as part of the Public Law Outline process, is thorough. Letters sent to parents before proceedings are carefully written and clearly set out local authority concerns. They outline the support available, the assessments that will be undertaken and generally use language that is easy to understand. Legal reviews are held regularly. Progress in completing agreed actions and improvements in children's circumstances as a result are closely tracked and evaluated. Meetings undertaken with families within this process enable parents to fully consider and understand the impact of adult behaviours on their children's experiences. As a result, some families make sufficient progress and step out of this legal process.

Senior leaders and managers have an accurate view of the quality of practice, informed by a comprehensive performance management information and quality

assurance framework. This supports all staff and leaders to have a clear understanding of the quality of practice and improvements required. The chosen social work model is widely embraced, understood and practised by staff and partners. As a result, change is achieved for many families and children experiencing complex and long-standing difficulties.

Social workers and other frontline practitioners benefit from a wide spectrum of training opportunities in the practice model in addition to other subjects, enabling them to build their professional knowledge and expertise. The range and frequency of supervision complements and supports frontline workers, providing powerful, highly reflective and evaluative practice that ensures children's experiences are at the heart of decision-making. Managers regularly review caseloads to ensure they are manageable. Through an assertive recruitment programme, senior leaders have swiftly addressed some recent turnover in the workforce and children benefit from enduring relationships with their social workers.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning your next inspection or visit.

Your sincerely

Amanda Maxwell
Her Majesty's Inspector