

Inspection of Bedford Borough local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 15 to 26 November 2021

Lead inspector: Margaret Burke, 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	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

COVID-19 has placed huge pressures on children and families in Bedford Borough. Many staff in the local authority have been personally affected by the virus. Despite this, services have adapted well to significant changes in demand through the past 20 months. There continues to be a strong focus on public health, and keeping children, families and the workforce safe remains a key priority for the authority. Leaders have made sure that support for children and families has continued. Practitioners have used a range of approaches and technology to continue their work with children and their families. Children at risk of harm have continued to have face-to-face visits throughout.

A relentless focus on strengthening practice has seen progress in most of the areas identified at the last inspection for improvement. Services for children are now judged to be good. Strong early help services and effective partnerships ensure good support for parents to meet their children's needs. Fostering and adoption services continue to provide good care for children. Children's views are fully reflected in the plans made for them, and they influence the council's strategic agenda and the delivery of services. As in many other authorities, the recruitment of experienced social workers remains a challenge for Bedford. Although vacancy rates and use of agency staff are lower than at the last full inspection, staff turnover and workload pressures continue to affect some children's experiences.

What needs to improve?

- The quality and timeliness of support to disabled children.
- Oversight of children living in private fostering arrangements.
- Engagement of children in return home interviews, and the aggregation of information to reduce the risk of children going missing.
- Partner engagement and influence of the corporate parenting panel.

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

1. Children and their families who need help have easy access to the right level of support through the Integrated Front Door (IFD). Close alignment and joint working between social workers and early help services enable most children and families to be helped and have their needs met at the lowest threshold level.
2. Effective partnership arrangements and the council's continued investment and commitment to early help services have strengthened the support and programmes available for children and their families. Early help practitioners engage family and professional networks successfully, ensuring that children quickly get the help they need for their situations to improve. Specialist caseworkers and, more recently, the adolescent response team within the early help service provide more intensive support to families with more complex needs, avoiding the need for families to go through the statutory assessment process unnecessarily.
3. Managers oversee, review and prioritise all contacts that come into the IFD to identify children in need of help and protection. Where safeguarding concerns are evident at the point of referral, or become clear during information gathering, children's casework is swiftly passed to the assessment team to ensure a timely response. Parental consent is appropriately sought; when it is dispensed with, the reasons for this are proportionate to the level of concern and are clearly recorded. Highly skilled and experienced practitioners provide timely and thorough help for children who require an emergency response outside of normal office hours. Practitioners record their involvement well and ensure effective follow up by the IFD or the child's allocated worker.
4. Referral and advice officers (RAO) are thorough in their approach to information gathering, working respectfully with parents, appropriately seeking information from partners and summarising historical information. RAOs work tenaciously to ensure that the views and voices of children are represented at this early stage, enabling a fuller understanding of the impact of their circumstances. There has been a substantial increase in the numbers of contacts and referrals into the IFD in the last six months. Consequently, the follow-up response for a small number of less urgent referrals has not been

completed within allocated timescales. Leaders are aware of the pressures within IFD and are actively recruiting additional workers.

5. Agencies referring allegations and concerns about adults working with children receive appropriate and proportionate responses to protect children. The designated officer for the local authority ensures that most allegations are promptly concluded. Good collaboration with partner agencies and neighbouring designated officer services helps identify concerns and ensures consistent threshold decisions and responses.
6. Child protection strategy meetings are held in a timely manner, and are well attended by relevant partners. Records of strategy discussions are detailed, capturing the multi-agency discussions which inform outcomes and next steps. Concerns and issues are thoroughly explored. Clear plans ensure that investigations proceed with the right steps taken to ensure that children are seen and action is taken to protect them. When necessary, child protection medicals and Achieving Best Evidence interviews are arranged promptly, to clarify risks and inform safety planning.
7. Thresholds for child protection planning are appropriate and multi-agency partners are fully engaged in the work with children. Whole family involvement and considerate exchanges with parents help them understand professionals' concerns and what change is required to achieve positive outcomes for their children. Neglect continues to be the most frequent reason for children being on a child protection plan in Bedford Borough. Practitioners demonstrate an excellent understanding of its long-term corrosive nature and its effects on children. Actions that are well coordinated through multi-agency child protection planning help to improve children's circumstances. Where progress is not evident, decisive action is taken.
8. Families who are experiencing domestic abuse are supported well. Practitioners work to understand the impact this has on children and offer tailored support to meet their needs. When it is considered safe and in children's best interests, attempts are made to also speak to the alleged perpetrator to seek their views and involve them in the work going forward to keep children safe. Parents are encouraged to engage with specialist community services available for both victims and perpetrators.
9. Children's assessments are generally comprehensive and up to date. Historical, contextual and influencing factors are explored alongside the impact of the concerns on children. Work in this area has been strengthened through systemic practice training. Skilled practitioners use assessment tools effectively, balancing what is working well for children with any risks and concerns, and closely tracking change and progress. Social workers work respectfully with families, delivering interventions themselves or jointly with specialist services to drive improvements for children and families. Children and their families receive help while the assessment process is ongoing. Workload pressures and staff changes have meant that a small number of children's assessments are not

completed or updated within timescales set out by managers. Where children's circumstances are changing, this may make it harder to ensure all their current needs are met.

10. Children's plans are detailed and relevant. They set out the range of services available to support successful change. Child protection plans and child in need plans address concerns clearly and are regularly reviewed. Good partnership involvement and attendance at meetings ensures effective support for families, and a clearer picture of progress made for children. Professionals use these meetings well to break actions down into workable stages for families and develop further actions as required. Open and honest conversations take place with families, focusing on change required and challenging false compliance. This enables families to have a clear understanding of expectations and the work that they or others must complete.
11. Workers are well supported by managers at all levels. Management oversight is regular and evident in most children's case records, although there is some variability in its effectiveness. For many workers, managers' input encourages reflective discussion and supports practitioners to find alternative ways to progress children's plans. In some children's cases, these discussions result in the practitioner changing their approach to better support the family to make the changes needed for their children. In the small number of children's cases where management oversight is weaker, the rationale for actions taken and next steps is not clear from discussions with workers or in case records. While supervision discussions are taking place, they do not always pick up gaps in social workers' recording or delays to case progression. For these children, management decisions to adjust interventions or to escalate are not made quickly enough.
12. Effective senior management oversight supports progress in children's cases once a decision has been made to escalate into the Public Law Outline (PLO). The head of service chairs legal planning meetings that give clear direction to ensure children are kept safe while assessments are conducted, and plans are put in place for their futures. The circumstances of all children subject to the pre-proceedings stage of the PLO, or to court proceedings, are reviewed on a fortnightly basis and action taken to prevent drift and delay in achieving the best outcomes for them. The strength of this approach is most evident where there are risks to unborn babies. Where previously considered an area of concern, practice and decision-making have strengthened through learning from Bedford's rapid reviews about risk to young babies. An early assessment of parents allows for the full consideration of risk and the needs of the unborn child. Practitioners respond swiftly when the child's situation changes, and risks escalate. Early consideration of PLO supports effective work with these families, while their parenting needs are assessed and supported and parallel plans considered. Rigorous assessments and planning help to keep unborn babies and very young children safe by supporting decisive action when risks heighten to place matters before the courts.

13. Practitioners across the service build relationships of trust with children. They make skilful use of a range of tools to get to know and capture children's wishes and feelings. Children's views are listened to, supported and acted on. Children, including those with disabilities, attend meetings about themselves, and are supported to contribute meaningfully. Practitioners build enduring relationships with parents and wider family members, helping them with their own needs and enabling them to better support their children. Similarly, they make persistent efforts to engage with children's fathers, to ensure that children can enjoy safe and stable relationships with them. High workloads and changes in practitioners make it challenging for a small number of workers to undertake meaningful direct work with all the children on their caseloads.
14. The quality of practice in the children with disabilities team is variable. A small number of children are not seen with sufficient frequency to ensure that their changing needs are identified early so that effective plans can be put in place. For some of these children, effective support and intervention has only just begun, with work escalated to child protection planning. Once within this framework, effective support is made available, and progress is made in meeting these children's needs.
15. Oversight of privately fostered children is not robust enough. Children and carers are initially seen swiftly by the fostering and assessment teams. However, ongoing visiting and follow-on work to assess children's and carers' needs more fully are not always timely to ensure that appropriate support is put in place.
16. Homeless 16 and 17-year-olds are supported very well. When return to parents is not considered as an option, solutions are explored and considered within their extended family or networks. Young people who need accommodation are offered informed choices under section 20 or section 17 of the Children Act 1989. Their needs are fully considered, their wishes taken into account, and appropriate help provided. Practitioners receive practical guidance, and effective management oversight supports good decisions for young people.
17. Children who go missing from home or care are offered return home interviews. However, as leaders had recognised in their performance monitoring, the take up of these interviews is still too low to enable a fuller understanding as to the reasons involved. Some cared-for children receive a less timely response. There was little evidence to indicate that intelligence is aggregated to learn from return home interviews and prevent further missing episodes. This was an area identified at the last full inspection, but progress in this area is slow.
18. Good multi-agency communication and information-sharing supports work to safeguard children at risk of extra-familial harm. The adolescent response team has a good understanding of the risks that young people face; this helps the team to deliver intensive, focused support. Risks are understood and interventions managed within effective multi-agency plans. Children and families are seen regularly and trusting relationships built to safely divert

children from harm. Whenever possible, children and their families are involved in the creation of safety plans, and work with them is regularly reviewed and plans adapted in response to changes in their lives. Children have been successfully supported to reduce missing episodes, change friendships and return to education. Safety planning is not always evident in case summaries and care plans.

19. Senior leaders are aware of their statutory duties for children who are home educated. Their high ambitions ensure that children's needs are accounted for and children are supported to stay in education. Improved communication and early intervention have reduced the number of children leaving school and becoming home educated, or children missing education. The local authority, through PLACE, the parent-led and community-based education service, provides effective educational and social support to parents and children who are on the home education register. Professionals work collaboratively to identify children who are missing education. They take appropriate action to support children back into school.

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

20. Children and families receive purposeful support to help them to remain living together. When this cannot be safely achieved, and it is in their best interests, children come into care.
21. Children who come into care are well matched and cared for by skilled carers in homes that meet their needs. Foster carers provide very good support for children. They advocate effectively for them and include them fully in their own family interests and networks. Most children and young people are safe and settled where they live. There is a strong focus on the importance of family. Family time is prioritised. Social workers and carers support children to maintain safe contact with family members, even when there are no plans for them to return to their families. This includes extended family members who are important to the child. Birth parents are involved in their children's lives when this is possible; many attend key events and celebrations.
22. Children are supported well to understand their family backgrounds and identities, and to make sense of why they are being cared for away from their birth family. Their wishes and feelings are sought and continuously captured throughout all aspects of practitioners' work with them. Children's plans explain clearly how their holistic needs will be met.
23. Most cared-for children are visited regularly by social workers who get to know them well. Children are supported by skilful practitioners to form relationships of trust which enable them to share their worries and concerns. Not all cared-for disabled children or children with impaired learning are visited often enough by their social workers to form meaningful relationships with them.

24. Children are fully involved in their reviews. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) routinely contact children prior to their reviews, building meaningful relationships with them so that they understand their view of progress and know the people and issues that matter to them. Children receive carefully written letters from their IRO to confirm the decisions of the review and the plan in place for them.
25. There is a sufficient range and choice of placements available to meet the needs of most cared-for children. Signs of any placement instability are usually picked up early and support quickly put in place. A recent decline in placement stability is beginning to show signs of improvement. Foster carers are supported by their supervising social workers and children's social workers to work closely with birth families. This is helping to create stronger relationships for children and, in turn, more stable placements.
26. However, for a small number of children with very complex needs, who are subject to deprivation of liberty applications or S25 orders, finding suitable placements in crisis situations has been challenging. Very recently, the local authority has had to use unregistered provision for two children. Senior managers sign off and oversee these placements. They actively consider move-on accommodation for these children and encourage providers to register when deemed appropriate.
27. From the onset of children's care journeys, the need for permanency is held in mind and practitioners continue to seek out the best long-term permanent care option for them. IROs ensure that the best plans are made for children and that all possible routes to permanence are explored.
28. Reunification within families is proactively and patiently pursued whenever possible. Social workers work meticulously to maintain and rebuild family relationships, and to support parents to make changes to enable them to safely care for their children.
29. A small number of children who are subject to Care Orders are placed with their parents. This is done at a time that is right for them, in their best interests, and in line with their own and their family's wishes. Senior leaders maintain good oversight of these arrangements, keeping abreast of the progress of work to ensure that these placements continue to meet children's needs. Plans to appropriately revoke orders are routinely considered, but plans to do so have been delayed by the current backlog in the family courts due to the pandemic.
30. Children are effectively prepared for, and carefully matched with, permanent family placements. Their wishes and feelings influence decisions about where they live. They are helped to develop secure, primary attachments with the adults caring for them.
31. Concurrent and parallel planning are used well for children. Fostering and adoption panels ensure that children are effectively matched with families.

Adoption is considered carefully and promptly for all children who are unable to return home or to their birth families, and who need a permanent alternative home. Good information is provided to ensure that all who are affected by adoption are aware of the support that is available. Kinship carers receive the same high standard of assessment and support as other foster carers. Equally, ongoing support continues following the granting of Special Guardianship Orders.

32. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) have access to interpreters and to information which helps them understand the services and support they will receive. There is good consideration of their holistic needs, especially a focus on their emotional and physical well-being given their experiences and journeys travelled. UASC and former UASC are quickly supported to engage in education.
33. Children's and care leavers' health needs are assessed, addressed and well supported. Support for their mental health is particularly good, with therapy and emotional support to help them to make sense of their previous experiences and current living situations. Children are given information about their health histories before they leave care. Where children are placed out of area, the advantages and disadvantages are carefully considered, to ensure this is the best option for them. Workers build strong relationships with professionals in other areas, working creatively with them to access relevant services and meet children's needs.
34. Children are supported to attend schools which encourage them to develop and achieve their full potential. Most have a basic personal education plan (PEP) which is reviewed termly as a minimum. However, educational targets within children's PEPs are too limited. They do not take sufficient account of the broader curriculum and the needs and interests of the child. Educational goals set out in PEPs for post-16 learners lack SMART targets. Notwithstanding this, most children are thriving because of their regular school attendance.
35. Personal advisers (PAs) are strong advocates for young people. They provide excellent support and they persistently challenge other professionals to ensure care leavers get the help they need. While young people are well supported by their social workers, transition to PA support starts too late for some.
36. Care leavers' pathway plans articulate well their views, wishes and feelings and explain clearly their rights and entitlements. Care leavers' changing needs are regularly reviewed. Plans for them are aspirational and set out specific actions in response to identified needs. They are monitored jointly with young people to ensure progress is made at a pace that is right for them.
37. Most care leavers are living in accommodation which they have helped to select with the support of their PA. PAs ensure that accommodation offers are suitable, often visiting with young people before an offer is accepted. Where problems emerge, care leavers are supported well by their PAs, who advocate

for them, broker support if they need it, and facilitate a transfer to more suitable accommodation if necessary. Young people are supported to remain with their foster carers. Staying put arrangements are also used creatively to provide weekend and holiday accommodation for care leavers who are studying away from home.

38. Care leavers who return to seek help post-21 receive a high standard of support to help them to achieve their ambitions. The proportion of Bedford care leavers who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) is lower than statistical neighbours. NEET learners receive personal tuition while they are helped to look for education or employment. The local authority has developed a range of apprenticeship opportunities for care leavers. A high proportion of young adults attend higher education courses, where they achieve good results. They continue to receive good practical, emotional and financial support.
39. Good support for care leavers includes the small number who are in custody. These young people are not forgotten about. They are supported well to plan for their release and for their futures. Some face-to-face visits have been restricted by COVID-19. However, these young people receive advice and support that helps them to get accommodation, access benefits and to explore employment, education and training options once they are back in the community.

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

40. Senior leaders have worked relentlessly to address the recommendations from the last full inspection in 2017. They have built on the strengths identified at that time, and services are now of a good standard. Support for children and their families is central to decisions made within strategic partnerships and remains a high priority for the council. This has translated into tangible outcomes, even at a time when the council's finances are stretched. The children's services base budget was strengthened by £3.5m in the last financial year. Continuous political commitment to early help and early years services, and financial investments the authority has made in other service areas, have had a positive impact for children and their families.
41. Effective communication and strong commitment to joint working are evident in senior leaders' relationships with key partners. Education providers, adult social care, housing, police and health services are all engaged strategically and practically in the provision of services to children and their families. Cafcass and the judiciary speak positively about strengthened communication with senior managers and the quality of social work practice.
42. Leaders have created a positive, relationship-based culture which they model in their relationships with staff, who in turn adopt a respectful, courteous approach in their work with families. Leaders are visible and approachable. Practitioners can speak easily to team managers, heads of service and senior

leaders, who show interest in their work with children and support them to make difficult decisions.

43. The council is aware of its corporate responsibility for children in care and care leavers. Corporate parenting panel meetings take place regularly. Recent developments have enabled children and young people to be involved in strengthening corporate parenting arrangements. They are now involved in selecting the agenda and topics for discussion at relevant meetings. There is some way to go, however. Their views are well represented by members of the engagement and development team, but children themselves are not yet present at corporate parenting board meetings, and the board does not include other partner agencies who contribute to corporate parenting. These gaps limit the board's ability to champion high ambition, creativity and challenge in the delivery of wider services to children in care and care leavers.
44. The local authority's self-evaluation demonstrates leaders' awareness of the changes in its communities and increasing demand for services. Leaders understand local need, they monitor performance effectively and are agile in response to changing demands and challenges. Leaders acknowledge the weaknesses found in the social work response to children with disabilities and they recognise the need to strengthen this work.
45. The local authority has continued to invest in the learning and development of its workforce. Leaders have cultivated many opportunities for staff to keep abreast with best practice, ensuring they have the necessary knowledge and skills to support children and families effectively. All staff are encouraged to undertake training; they can do so through a variety of formats. The borough's ongoing investment in practice based on systemic principles and building relationships shapes how practitioners work with children and families. Workers draw from a wider range of tools to enhance direct work with children and relationship-based working with families. This is leading to more positive outcomes for children.
46. Leaders seek to ensure that the voice of children is reflected in the broader range of the council's work. Children's views are considered at the council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee. This good practice informs and engages members and 'closes the loop' in terms of information and accountability across the organisation.
47. A whole systems approach to quality assurance links performance management, learning and development together. Audit findings feed into both strategic decisions and individual case work outcomes. Investment in a new records system is opening many new opportunities to understand and interrogate data. The new system is still being embedded and leaders recognise that more support is required to enable all staff to understand how to use the system and make best use of the available data.

48. While the council has made good progress in improving services since the last inspection, workforce challenges remain. The recruitment and retention of experienced social workers continues to be a focus, but it remains difficult. Against the backdrop of improvement, turnover of staff continues to make it harder for some children to form trusting relationships with their workers. In some parts of the service, high caseloads also impact on recording, timely follow-through of actions and practitioners accessing training.
49. The social work academy has been an asset in developing high-quality social workers. Staff who have benefited from this scheme spoke positively about the support they have been offered. Staff consistently report that they enjoy working for Bedford Borough Council. One of the main reasons for their commitment, repeated by many practitioners, was the visibility and approachability of senior leaders and the accessibility and availability of managers.



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