

Inspection of Bath and North East Somerset local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 28 February to 4 March 2022

Lead inspector: Steve Lowe, 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

Children in Bath and North East Somerset receive a good service. Despite the challenges of COVID-19 and increasing demand, senior leaders have been effective in strengthening services since Ofsted's last inspection in 2017. Substantial investment by political and senior leaders and an effective model of social work practice have played a key part in this. Practitioners are creative, thoughtful and effective in making children safer, and keeping families together whenever possible.

The redesign of the multi-agency 'front door', which is responsible for initial assessment and decision-making about referrals concerning children who may be in need or at risk of harm, has been managed well. Processes are now much clearer and more effective. Early help has been enhanced by fuller integration into the front door and children almost always receive support at the right time for them. Social work practice prior to, and during, legal proceedings is at the right pace for children. Children in care benefit from early permanence decisions. For a small number of the most vulnerable care leavers, the support that they receive is not as strong as it is for most children. As a result, it can take longer than necessary to find them safe, suitable places to live. When children return after having been missing from home or care, the learning from conversations held with them is not consistently well used to reduce the likelihood of them going missing again or to identify any wider patterns or trends.

What needs to improve?

- How effectively children are supported to take up return home interviews, and how well the learning from interviews is used to reduce the likelihood of them going missing again and to identify any wider patterns or trends.
- How well leaders ensure that all care leavers, particularly the most vulnerable, receive a high standard of support.
- The timeliness with which personal advisers (PAs) are allocated to children to help them prepare for leaving care and adulthood, and how consistently care leavers are supported beyond 21 and up to the age of 25.

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

1. Senior leaders have made significant improvements to the front door in Bath and North East Somerset (BANES), providing clarity for partner agencies and an improved service for children and families. Targeted services in early help, including 'Connecting Families' and 'Bright Start', provide clear pathways for support and are more fully integrated into early decisions. Thresholds for decisions about risk and need are well understood and appropriately applied, as is the need to obtain and record the consent of parents, carers and older children, or the reason that consent had to be dispensed with, before sharing information across agencies. When risks change, decisions to increase or decrease statutory child protection services are taken with reflection on the best way to both engage the family and sustain change in the longer term.
2. When families or partner agencies contact the triage service within the front door, staff swiftly direct them to either early help or to family support teams (FSTs) for assessment. When children are at immediate risk of harm, child protection strategy discussions are swift and action is appropriate. When concerns are less immediate, there are some delays in holding multi-agency discussions for a few children, due to the availability of police officers. Although services are provided to children pending these discussions being held, this can delay information-sharing for these children for a number of days. The local authority is aware of this recent issue, and a strategy is in place to remedy this shortfall. Increased consultation with schools, health professionals and daily incident review meetings are having a positive impact on the quality of referrals.
3. Families receive a good service if they need support in the evenings or at weekends. Positive working relationships between the emergency duty team and teams who operate during normal working hours mean there is no delay for children and their families.
4. When there are immediate safeguarding concerns for children, child protection strategy discussions are attended by key professionals and are held swiftly.

Decision-makers in child protection investigations identify clear next steps that help to safeguard children. When children and families would benefit from a fuller assessment of their needs, a transition meeting between triage team social workers and the FSTs adds clarity to the focus of the assessment.

5. Children's needs are assessed to a high standard, with detailed analysis about parental strengths and risk factors. A minority of assessments do take longer than statutory guidance recommends, but social workers provide the right support to children and families during this process. For a few children, assessments are not always reviewed and updated sufficiently regularly or when children's circumstances change, and this has the potential to limit how well their needs are identified and met. Families benefit from having the same social worker to assess and provide the identified support, and re-referrals are dropping because of these relationships. Most child in need and child protection plans are thorough. They identify needs and focus on actions that help to reduce risks to children. In a small number of children's cases, plans do not have specific timescales for completing actions and this limits the ability to monitor how work with children is being progressed.
6. Social workers show professional curiosity during visits to children. They demonstrate a clear understanding of children's lived experiences and views, including those of disabled children, when they undertake imaginative direct work. Children's relationships with social workers are enduring and purposeful, enabling their voices to be captured throughout assessments and plans. Planning to help manage the risks identified in child protection plans is effective.
7. Despite a recent increase in demand, staffing shortages and a small increase in social workers' caseloads, there has been little impact on children and their families due to the FSTs collectively knowing families well. A range of specialist services and resources have a positive impact on children's lives. The intensive support services 'Always Precious', 'Southside' and other community services positively support families to understand and modify their thinking and actions in the best interests of children.
8. When there are concerns about the safety of unborn babies, social workers demonstrate a sensitive balance between the needs of babies and the emotional impact on the parents. This is particularly strong in the innovative 'Born into Care' and 'Footprints' services and continues in effective work to tackle and identify the impact of domestic abuse on children.
9. The review of child in need and child protection plans is largely timely and helps both families and social workers focus on clear goals. Child protection conference chairs challenge and oversee social work practice effectively.
10. Management oversight and supervision are visible at key decision-making points and are clearly recorded. The quality of supervision is generally strong, ranging from providing clear actions and some practice reflection, in almost all cases, to some exemplary practice that strengthens planning, with high-quality reflection linking practice with theory and research.

11. When concerns about children's safety and well-being escalate, legal proceedings are used wisely. Impressively, for over half the children for whom pre-proceedings processes have been instigated, this strengthened level of intervention is proving successful. It is promoting sustainable change that is enabling children to stay safely with their families and preventing them from having to enter care. Senior managers and legal services oversee this process regularly and well. Feedback from the district judge and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service is overwhelmingly positive about the quality and effectiveness of this innovative and research-informed practice with children and their families.
12. When safeguarding concerns are raised about professionals who work with children, the local authority designated officer addresses these in a timely and effective manner. They also provide a helpful range of group and individual training to organisations, including early years services, that strengthen professionals' responses to safeguarding children.
13. Sixteen- and 17-year-olds who present as newly homeless receive a good service. They are made aware of their rights and are accommodated safely. This is not always the case for the small number of children who become homeless when they are already allocated to a social worker. Leaders took appropriate action to address this issue during the inspection.
14. Children at risk of criminal or sexual exploitation or who go missing have particularly strong relationships with social workers and family support workers based on trust. This is enhanced by very frequent visits and tenacious efforts to form relationships. Social workers are knowledgeable about the impact of extra familial risk. Along with key partners, they work in alliance with parents to reduce this risk and create networks that disrupt those who wish to do children harm.
15. However, there is an inconsistent approach to how return home interviews (RHI) are conducted and recorded. Many RHI forms are blank or not easily accessed on the child's record once they return safely, meaning that social workers cannot easily analyse why children went missing, whether risks are escalating and how to help reduce these risks. This also undermines the ability to draw together themes arising from episodes of children going missing and wider intelligence.
16. Children cared for under private fostering arrangements receive an appropriate service and there is good managerial oversight of these arrangements.
17. There are robust processes in place to identify and track children who are missing all or part of their education. Partnership working with schools is a strength. The fortnightly multi-agency 'children out of education panels' provide rigorous and comprehensive actions to improve access to education for these children.
18. Leaders have responded proactively to the increasing and changing cohort of families electing to educate children at home during the pandemic. There is a clear determination to engage with families who choose this route and to

ensure that they have the best possible information to help them. As a result, all families are either about to receive, or have received, visits or calls to discuss the education being provided, helping to ensure that there is oversight of the welfare of children.

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

19. Children in care in BANES receive a good service. Social workers know children well, visit them regularly and form strong relationships with them. This engagement is enhanced by the new practice model. Social workers understand why they are involved in children's lives and what they intend for the children's futures.
20. Children are made clear about options and plans for their permanent living arrangements as early as possible. Additional processes have recently been put in place to progress permanence plans for children, including a panel immediately prior to children's second child in care review meeting. Although the local authority is already doing well in achieving permanent homes for children quickly, such measures are demonstrative of their ongoing commitment to do even better.
21. Records are sensitively written to children and capture their views, so that if they read their records when older, they will be better able to understand why decisions were made about their care. Social workers spend meaningful time with children to build relationships, including helping them to reconnect with family members, going rock climbing, eating out at restaurants, and drawing and painting. This helps children to build the confidence to share past trauma at a pace they are comfortable with.
22. Time spent by children with their family and friends is encouraged and supported, and children's needs are central to decision-making about these arrangements.
23. Children's health is assessed and considered well, with referrals to specialist services when needed. Children's emotional well-being is supported and promoted through access to therapy and other services.
24. Children's plans are mostly reviewed regularly, but occasionally children have experienced minor delays due to key people not being available. These delays have generally been brief and have been agreed to ensure that the right people attend. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) know children's circumstances well and their oversight and input is clearly recorded in children's electronic case records. Children attend their reviews and share their wishes and feelings when they are able and want to do so, or use an advocate if they choose not to. The outcomes of reviews are sensitively written to children, capture their opinions and are used to inform care plans.
25. Foster carers are well trained and supported. The therapeutic support team provides a much-valued service directly to foster carers and children. A team of family support practitioners, including a clinical psychologist, are allocated to

foster carers and children without delay when needs arise, and this has helped to further improve placement stability. Children are supported by suitably qualified and skilled practitioners when completing life-story work and play therapy.

26. For a few children, such as older teenagers and those with the most complex needs, there is not currently a sufficient range or number of placement options to ensure that they are always matched with carers or homes as quickly as possible, or with those that best fit their needs. However, most children live with foster carers or in homes that are well matched to their needs, and the local authority has a comprehensive strategy in place to improve this further. Due to the small size of BANES, many children live out of the local authority area. These children do not receive a lesser service because of this. Indeed, for some children, this is a positive choice to place them where their needs can best be met.
27. An area of strength is the extensive consideration of family and friends' options for children, maximising the chances of children remaining in their community. Comprehensive support plans for special guardians are generous, creative and personalised, and the 'Fostering Families' scheme provides parents with support in their homes from skilled foster carers.
28. When adoption is in children's best interests, the local authority ensures that the regional adoption agency delivers a good service for children. Children are matched quickly and prepared sensitively, and their adoptive parents are supported well. Adoption breakdown is rare.
29. The individual identity needs of children in care are extremely well understood, including sexuality and gender identity, the position of children within their family group, and in relation to culture, religion and language. Social workers have a strong understanding of the history and trauma experienced by unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and how to respond effectively.
30. The virtual school headteacher provides clear, determined leadership, working closely with schools and carers to help ensure that children in care thrive. Exclusions are reviewed and challenged thoroughly and children in care are not permanently excluded from school. Most personal education plans are of a high quality and the pupil premium enhances children's educational experience.
31. Regular clinics, access to therapies, the 'Reboot' team improving employability through to the age of 25, and work experience opportunities are all helping to increase the number of care leavers who are in education, employment or training (EET). This package of support options is proving effective, but is not currently backed up by a formal offer of support from the virtual school.
32. Since the last inspection, the quality and impact of work with care leavers has undoubtedly improved. The creation of a dedicated team has played an important part in achieving this. Most care leavers receive the right support and help at the right time from passionate, dedicated and committed PAs who are non-judgemental in their approach. However, support to care leavers is not all of a consistently high standard. For the most vulnerable care leavers, the

support they receive can sometimes lack the rigour and tenacity offered to other more vulnerable children such as those in care with complex needs or children at risk of exploitation. For example, for a few of the small number of young people in unsuitable accommodation, more could be done to find accommodation better suited to their needs more quickly.

33. Pathway plans are usually completed with young people and, when plans are jointly constructed in this way, the young person's aspirations, hopes, wishes and voice are evident and bring life and meaning to the plan. These plans are usually regularly reviewed and updated, but on occasion lack clarity about longer-term aims for support. For some young people who have more complex circumstances, there is a lack of reflection on circumstance and risk.
34. The late allocation of PAs, nearer to care leavers' 18th birthdays than to their 16th, means that care leavers are not always prepared for the challenges of independence and adult life as well as they could be. Similarly, although care leavers over 21, such as those at university, are offered a service, support for most young people over 21 is more often reactive than proactive. They report that long-term relationships with their PAs are often ended prematurely.

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

35. Both corporately and politically, leaders demonstrate a strong commitment to achieving the best outcomes for children and families. Whether at the level of senior leaders or frontline practitioners, staff in BANES build effective working partnerships with statutory partner agencies, community groups and others to offer children and families an extensive range of services that are having a positive impact on their lives.
36. Against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic and the context of rising levels of need, workers and the organisation have remained focused on the most vulnerable members of the community. Additional financial investment and the effective roll-out of the local authority's systemic and relationship-based model of practice underpin this achievement. Senior leaders and the strategic partnership have a clear picture of the evolving and complex needs of the community. A forward-thinking approach to violence reduction, tackling child exploitation in all its forms, and to corporate parenting as a whole-council responsibility is helping to shape and deliver effective services for children.
37. Senior leaders know their service strengths and their areas for improvement very well. Their self-assessment is honest and accurate and is clearly aligned with the needs of the local community. More broadly, a genuine interest and commitment to developing practice through conferences, research, peer challenge and ongoing reflection leads to a well-informed and contemporary transformation programme.
38. Senior leaders have responded positively to the recommendations from the last inspection and much progress has been made against each of them. Although some recent delays remain in one specific area of the front door, they have

reduced and a plan for further improvement is in place; families in the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline are supported well and their progress tracked efficiently; child protection chairs, IROs and team managers address gaps in practice more effectively, bolstered by a quality assurance framework that is more robust; and the percentage of children who are in EET continues to improve, while a strategy to reduce school exclusions is having a positive impact on reducing gaps in education experienced by children during the pandemic. Support to care leavers has been strengthened, but leaders know that there is more to do in order for this to provide a consistently strong service to all care leavers.

39. The experiences and views of children and their families, including what needs to change, are welcomed and incorporated into individual planning for children and the local authority's wider strategic planning. 'Building Bridges', incorporating the views of families who have received a service, the local authority's Children in Care Council, the involvement of young carers and ongoing consultation all figure strongly in strategic plans. Meaningful participation is a long-standing strength in BANES.
40. Commissioned and in-house services provide an impressive array of support and are used in a considered and targeted way with families that is effective in addressing children's needs and enhancing their welfare. Although gaps remain in the sufficiency of accommodation for a few children in care and care leavers, a clear strategy to address this shortfall has been developed, including the development of housing stock and creative, collective commissioning arrangements.
41. Robust and effective performance and quality assurance oversight is embedded throughout the organisation. Regular, moderated auditing of children's records identifies well the strengths in social work practice as well as areas for improvement. The local authority has a plan in place to further strengthen this process through more regularised feedback from children and families. The use of accurate data complemented by regular performance meetings provides senior leaders with a precise picture of achievements against ambitious key indicators. The extension of outcome-based data into early help is a good example of how managers understand the impact of the work they deliver and so can drive further improvement.
42. Senior managers are very visible to, and thought very highly of by, staff and partner agencies. Staff say that they feel very well supported, especially through the pandemic. The availability of clinical supervision, flexible working arrangements, largely manageable caseloads and clear career opportunities mean that social workers remain with BANES as an employer of choice. This is reflected in the low use of agency staff and the high proportion of staff who have been supported to pursue specialist training and qualifications.
43. Leaders have ensured that social workers have largely manageable caseloads, receive strong support and direction from their managers, and know what is expected of them within a clear model of social work practice. The redesign of the FSTs supports a consistent, familiar social worker for the vast majority of

families. This is a similar picture for disabled children, children in care and care leavers. The move to the new practice model has been managed well, and substantial investment in training and delivering the new approach has proved successful. The stable, permanent and consistent management team, from team manager level through to senior leaders, continues to be a key factor in the ongoing progress of services for children in BANES.

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