

## Inspection of Bracknell Forest local authority children's services

**Inspection dates:** 13 to 17 June 2022

**Lead inspector:** Amanda Maxwell, 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	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding

An ambitious senior leadership team has ensured that children living in Bracknell Forest get consistently good and often better support from its services. Children receive the right support at the right time. There is strong corporate support for children's services, with investment appropriately provided to prioritise services for vulnerable children.

Since the last inspection, there has been further work and progress to embed the application of the chosen model of practice across the service. More children and their families are now supported by specialist workers working alongside skilled children's social workers. This helps parents gain insight and understanding about behaviours that have a negative impact on their ability to care for their children. Through this individualised and intensive work, many families have been able to bring about positive change which has improved their parenting and the quality of their relationships with their children.

Relationships with partners have been strengthened and improved, which has had a positive impact on the quality of referral information and early joint working. The quality of early support and intervention with children and families has improved. All the areas for improvement identified in previous inspections have been addressed. Leaders have provided additional services to support parents and carers who are caring for adolescents. This supports young people to remain living in their homes and only come into care when necessary.

There is a healthy culture of child-focused support and challenge across the organisation that is evident at all service levels. This holds everyone to account for

children's experiences and progress. There are a small number of specific areas for children in care and care leavers which require further development.

### **What needs to improve?**

- The participation of care leavers in the development of services.
- The quality of practice and earlier planning that supports care leavers to be engaged in education, training and employment.

### **The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: outstanding**

1. Children who need help and protection in Bracknell Forest receive a consistently high quality service.
2. There are a wide range of high-quality early help services which support children and families who need additional help in their lives. Children and families benefit from this well-established early help support. Contacts from partner agencies contain relevant information. Urgent needs are responded to so that children are protected in the evenings and weekends. Effective management oversight of risk leads to well-informed decision-making. As a result, families are provided with timely and proportionate support. Parental consent is considered effectively so that meaningful relationships with families are enabled from the outset.
3. When risks to children escalate, their needs are considered in prompt multi-agency strategy meetings. Attendance of key partner agencies has improved since the last inspection. Child protection enquiries are informed by detailed information-sharing and result in appropriate decision-making. Effective management oversight means that where a risk of significant harm is identified, child protection processes commence, leading to clear multi-agency plans of protection being put in place for children.
4. Assessments are clear, detailed and thorough. They are written in plain language which explains concerns sensitively to parents and provides clarity about the risk and needs of children.
5. Child protection plans are outcome-focused with actions specific to children and expectations of parents that are clear and comprehensive. This results in effective support and interventions so that risks and needs for children reduce and their situations improve. Some child in need plans are more basic and do not thoroughly explore identified needs. They do not break tasks down into small enough achievable steps for families to engage with in a meaningful way. As a result, for a small number of children progress is not as effective.
6. There is thoughtful consideration of emerging risk within planning, ensuring that when required, children step up from child in need to child protection or pre-proceedings. Thresholds are appropriately applied, and children get the right level of support and intervention. Children are safeguarded and not exposed to further risk. Families are provided with a seamless transition

between the two services when children need either to step down from statutory intervention or where increasing risk is identified. Pre-proceedings work is highly effective and letters before proceedings provide a detailed understanding to parents about what is expected of them. As a result, a substantial proportion of families are appropriately diverted from court processes.

7. Social workers receive regular, purposeful multi-agency group supervision which is facilitated through the service's chosen social work model. The sharing of findings and views for each worker provides a detailed understanding of the family situation, progress and what the barriers are that stop families making the required changes. This evaluation informs future case work and intervention.
8. Knowledgeable and passionate workers know children they work with very well. Children are regularly seen by the same social worker and their voice is clearly recorded and understood. As a result, children develop meaningful relationships with their workers. Positive child-focused individualised direct work is completed with children, including the consistent use of 'all about me' to elicit their views, wishes and feelings. Workers use a variety of direct work tools to support them in gaining an understanding of a child's experiences. This means that children's plans and assessments are informed by their views. Meaningful and very beneficial direct work completed by the passionate specialist workers, such as domestic abuse workers, is having a very positive impact on children and their families. This approach enables children and adults to gain an insight into their challenges and establish ways which help them to manage anxiety and behaviours in a positive way.
9. Children at risk of criminal and sexual exploitation are overseen by the local authority's well-established 'make safe' team. Effective risk management meetings share information and update exploitation risk assessments. Oversight of the quality and themes of return home interviews following episodes of going missing informs plans to protect children and to reduce further episodes of going missing. Workers develop trusting, long-standing relationships with young people, engaging them in face-to-face missing 'conversations' (return home interviews) to consider risk and strategies to reduce episodes of going missing.
10. The number of children missing education is small. Leaders in Bracknell Forest have developed a collaborative approach to monitoring and supporting these children and those educated at home.
11. Disabled children assessed as needing social care support receive a considered proportionate service. Clear efforts are made to consider the support needs of parents and carers and children's plans are purposeful, clear and focused. Children's needs are re-evaluated through effective multi-agency review meetings. As a result, disabled children and their families are provided with highly effective tailored support which improves their experiences.
12. There is an effective collaborative response to domestic abuse, neglect and parental substance misuse. Close liaison between domestic abuse workers and social workers ensures that plans and interventions meet needs and minimise

risk to children. The quality of social work practice is enhanced by the provision of specialised support through their social work practice model and the permanence planning team and is highly effective in enabling and sustaining change for families. This additional support has been effective in enabling families and carers to positively address behaviours which have a negative impact on their ability to care for their children. This support has been very impactful in enabling more children to return to the care of their parents and remain in their care.

13. Since the last inspection, timely responses have been provided to young people who present as homeless. They are immediately supported with appropriate offers of accommodation. Young people have their rights and entitlements fully explained to them so that they can make an informed choice.

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

14. Children and young people in the care of Bracknell Forest benefit from consistently good support and care from their committed and caring social workers and foster carers. Children come into care when they need to.
15. Children return to their parents' care when it is safe for them to do so. There is good consideration given to children's wishes, to the level of risk and to the support required to give the return home the greatest chance of success. When children cannot remain with their parents, other family members are well considered and assessed to enable children to continue to live with their extended family whenever possible. When family arrangements are not possible, most children live in alternative stable homes that meet their needs and where they make good progress. Children's needs are carefully considered when matching and placing them with foster carers. When placements are at risk of breakdown, effective additional support is provided by specialist services. Most children's care plans contain the right actions to promote their progress. They are thorough and have a good focus on leisure and enrichment activities for children.
16. Most children benefit from permanent homes being found in a timely manner. Children benefit from well-paced adoptions or placements with special guardians and connected carers. Permanence and parallel planning are very well considered. Very effective tracking panels ensure that there is no delay in identifying and implementing permanence plans for children.
17. Children are seen as often as needed by their social workers, who work hard to build meaningful relationships with them. Life journey work is proactively undertaken with children to help promote their identity and support their understanding of their identity and their history. Workers often use creative ways to engage and communicate with children and young people. This ensures that children's voices are heard and that their views and wishes inform planning. Family time is encouraged and supported to ensure that children maintain links with their family and people important to them.

18. Children in care are helped to understand their rights and entitlements. They have access to independent visitors, and some have this support for a significant period. Children benefit from the provision of advocacy support to ensure that their voice is heard when plans are made about them.
19. Sexual and criminal exploitation and other risks to children are proactively identified and managed. Effective plans based on accurate risk assessments are implemented to help protect children. The 'make safe' team undertakes effective and tenacious work to promote children's safety.
20. Health assessments, including dental checks, are completed in a timely manner and good use is made of them in plans for children. Children are routinely involved in discussions about their health and carers are given clear advice on how best to meet children's health needs. Children's need for additional emotional health support is recognised and specialist psychological support is available. This supports them to learn positive ways to explore and manage their experiences and emotions. The right support and interventions are in place for most children in care to flourish.
21. Personal education plans for children are of good quality. They reflect a personalised approach for children, with a clear focus on children's educational, social, emotional and developmental needs. Plans are completed in a timely manner. The targets they contain are relevant and support children and young people to make good or better progress. Designated teachers and headteachers are positive about the work of the virtual school and are appreciative of the quality of the professional development offered. The virtual school caters for its pupils exceptionally well. Children's educational and social and emotional development are supported by experienced staff who are respected by school leaders and designated teachers.
22. Children placed out of authority are well supported. They receive the right support to meet their health and educational needs. They are seen regularly by their social workers, and they can access placement support when needed. There is a focus to bring children back to live in Bracknell if this is consistent with their needs and wishes. When social workers are unable to identify a suitable registered home for a child, there is robust oversight of temporary arrangements. They work with providers to ensure that they apply to be registered.
23. Foster carers spoken to by inspectors commented positively about the ease and timeliness with which they can access support. Supervising social workers have achieved a good balance between professional vigilance and challenge and providing support to foster carers. Assessments of foster carers are completed on time and are generally of good quality.
24. Senior leaders and managers have thorough arrangements in place to maintain their oversight of the regional adoption agency (Adopt Thames Valley). They assure themselves that children get a good service and support to ensure successful adoption pathways. Assessments are detailed and show that care is taken to explore the dynamics of prospective adopters' lives to make sure they are a good match for the children they are going to care for.

25. The fostering and adoption panel minutes are detailed and show that relevant questions are asked which allow decisions to be made based on a sound evidence base. Panel members provide sensible and developmental feedback about the quality of assessments and processes. This helps ensure a consistent quality of service. Children are well matched with foster carers and adopters who can access a range of therapeutic and support services. This maximises their understanding of and ability to care for children long term.
26. Young people who have left care are offered tenacious and skilled support by their personal assistants (PAs), who are introduced to them at some point prior to their 18th birthday. Not all care leavers benefit from forming meaningful relationships in good time prior to their 18th birthday. PAs maintain regular contact with young people, enabling them to develop effective relationships with care leavers. Young people speak highly of individualised support provided by their PAs. Young people aged over 21 are contacted to ask if they need continuing help and some elect to come back to the service to receive further support. Support provided is flexible and persistent, offering young people practical help and support when needed.
27. Participation work with care leavers is underdeveloped. A care leavers council has recently been formed and only a small number of young people are involved. The influence and impact of young people on service design is in its infancy and much more remains to be done to build the council to represent more young people who receive support.
28. PAs have higher than optimal caseloads and this sometimes affects their ability to provide all the support they would like to assist young people. They receive regular case supervision; however, there is a focus on the young person's situation rather than an evaluation of the effectiveness of the support being provided.
29. Pathway plans are written in collaboration with young people. They explore and consider all aspects of a young person's life and detail what is needed to meet their needs and who is responsible for fulfilling them. Plans are updated every six months, or when a young person's circumstances change. Some pathway plans lack detail in setting out the specific skills young people need for their next steps and how they will be achieved.
30. PAs are ambitious for young people and support them well to achieve their aspirations. Young people have been well supported to re-engage with opportunities through the support provided by their PAs to attend and engage with job coaches, support programmes and the virtual school. However, not enough young people are currently in employment, education or training and relatively few have progressed into higher education.

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

31. Strong leadership in Bracknell Forest has navigated the authority well through the COVID-19 pandemic and the challenges which this created for the

authority. High service standards have been maintained and in many areas improved further. A child-focused approach is apparent throughout the service, from senior leaders, politicians, to social workers and other staff. Children's experiences and progress matter in Bracknell Forest and this is underpinned by the highly effective collaboration work undertaken with partners.

32. There is a strong corporate and whole-council approach to support children. The council has appropriately invested and prioritised resources for vulnerable children. There is active involvement and attendance by all senior leaders and politicians at all corporate boards and committees in which key decisions for children are made. This ensures that key issues are heard and addressed. The council has taken a positive approach to supporting children recently arriving in the area, including unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and refugee families.
33. The chief executive has a robust and realistic oversight and understanding of the service. Likewise, the passion, dedication and involvement of the lead member is highly evident across many service areas. Children in care have told us that they meet with him regularly to share their views and thoughts about the quality of care they receive. The lead member also ensures that the whole council makes it their business to know and understand about children in Bracknell Forest and what is important for them.
34. There is a positive and dynamic culture across the service, with a strong focus on support and challenge. Leaders lead by example and are available to all staff when needed for case exploration and discussion.
35. Corporate parents want to do the best for children in care and care leavers. There is very good engagement and involvement from the children in the care council group SILSIP (Say It Loud, Say It Proud).
36. The corporate offer for care leavers is underdeveloped, especially regarding education, employment and training. There has been a reduction in the number of care leavers who are engaged in meaningful activity. Senior leaders acknowledge this; however, more is needed to be ambitious for all.
37. The local authority has invested in, developed and refreshed many initiatives and projects. The 'make safe' service is one example which has a positive impact on children who are deemed at risk of contextual safeguarding. Children and their families' situations improve due to this involvement and support.
38. Senior leaders know their services well and have developed an extensive quality assurance framework. They use a wide array of qualitative and quantitative information to inform them about the quality and effectiveness of practice. They are proactive in addressing concerns swiftly once questions or themes in practice are identified.
39. Leaders and managers are working tirelessly to develop more placement options for children and young people. Clear development and strategic plans are in place which direct tasks and actions to further develop and transform the fostering service. There is a strong focus on practical support and training for

foster carers to enable them to meet the needs of complex children and young people.

40. Leaders and managers have done a great deal to respond to staff recruitment challenges. Senior leaders are open and honest about the impact this has had on a small number of staff, with some caseloads being higher than they would like. Senior leaders have implemented a clear plan of activities to support and address this, with additional practical support available to social workers. Staff spoken to by inspectors really like working for Bracknell Forest. Leaders have been creative about how to attract new staff as well as focusing on supporting and developing the current workforce. Their efforts are having a positive impact and workforce stability is improving.
41. The chosen social work model is a strength and is embraced by the whole workforce and partners, with a collective understanding of the positive impact of the whole-family approach. The model of group supervision involving all specialist workers provides real clarity and understanding about need, risk intervention and what makes a difference to children. It is also very supportive for staff as it enables case reflection and challenge. Senior leaders have provided refresher training to reinvigorate and strengthen the application of the model. This, alongside the wider use of specialist workers, has had a significant impact on practice and the effective interventions provided to improve children's family experiences.



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