

Inspection of Blackpool local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 5 to 16 December 2022

Lead inspector: Lisa Summers, His Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

Since the last Ofsted inspection in November 2018, when Blackpool local authority children's services was judged to be inadequate overall, strong, capable, and determined leadership has overseen improvements across children's social care. There has been a steady pace of improvement which has allowed leaders to restructure services and embed new ways of working. Significant corporate investment has supported the service restructure and increased stability of the workforce at all levels. The current director of children's services (DCS) has accelerated improvements through a relentless focus on recruitment and retention, and by improving the engagement of partners. An effective quality assurance framework is supporting a better understanding of the impact that services are having on children's experiences. Children and families are better engaged and are now helping to shape services.

Direct work with children is now a strength. Children are well supported by social workers who understand their experiences. Core social work practice has been strengthened across each part of the service. Most assessments, plans and planning are effective, and more children are now having their needs identified and met. Children at risk of exploitation, or who present as homeless, receive an excellent service. Permanence for children in care is pursued and secured quickly so that children have a sense of security, stability and belonging. Care leavers are now very well supported.

Blackpool is not delivering good help and protection for all its children. There is insufficient management grip to improve practice with some children and families. There is a lack of robust scrutiny by leaders and managers of the quality of decision-making in the newly established multi-agency risk assessment conference team (MARAC). The quality of practice for disabled children in the children with complex needs team requires improvement. Strategic partnerships are not always translating into effective multi-agency help for children experiencing long-term neglect. Some of these children experience delays in entering care and during the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline (PLO). Decision-making is too adult-focused, leaving these children in harmful situations for too long. A lack of suitable foster placements means that a small number of young children are not living in homes that suit their assessed needs.

What needs to improve?

- The multi-agency response to children suffering domestic abuse or long-term neglect, and to those children with complex needs.
- Work with partners to strengthen their contribution to early help and neglect.
- Sufficient placements to meet children's assessed needs.
- The timeliness of meeting children's dental and emotional needs.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: requires improvement to be good

1. There has been steady progress in improving services for children who need help and protection, from a significantly low base. Children and families in Blackpool benefit from an effective early help offer. Partners are becoming increasingly engaged, but there is still more to do to develop partners' confidence in taking responsibility as lead professionals. The majority of early help assessments are comprehensive, family history is explored well to identify needs, and clear contingency plans are developed at the point of allocation. Plans are creative and routinely reviewed, focusing on what needs to change, how it will be achieved, by who and by when. A well-managed family support service is providing an effective response to meeting children's needs.
2. The multi-agency hub has been strengthened. The majority of children receive a timely and appropriate initial response to requests for help and protection, both during and outside of normal office hours. Managers provide clear direction to inform social workers' next steps. Parental consent to share information about them or their children is routinely sought or dispensed with as appropriate. When risks to children are clear, the response is swift and effective. Screening is mostly comprehensive and is well informed by a broad range of partner information. In weaker screening, history is not always sufficiently explored to fully understand children's experiences in the context of current concerns.

3. The response to concerns for children who experience incidents of high-level parental domestic abuse is not always sufficiently robust. A newly-established MARAC team has been developed to facilitate better-coordinated responses to children, but this team is in its infancy. Initial screening and assessments for some children who experience domestic abuse are too adult-focused and are not always based on a broad range of information. Assessments do not consistently evaluate history to fully understand children's experiences. As a result, some children do not get the help they need at the earliest opportunity, leading to repeated referrals because they have experienced further incidents of harm.
4. When risk of harm is identified, there is a mostly effective and timely response to children who need protection. Strategy meetings share information appropriately and identify risk and next steps in relation to child protection enquiries. Meetings do not always define initial safety planning while enquiries are ongoing. This is mitigated by social workers seeing children quickly and implementing plans to reduce risk. This means the management of risk is not always shared by partner agencies.
5. Most social work practice is impactful and making a positive difference to children's lives. Assessments, including child protection enquiries, are thorough and detailed. Visits to children are purposeful and sensitive, leading to a comprehensive understanding of children's experiences. Children's identities are well considered. Assessments provide a clear evaluation of strengths and risk, leading to appropriate recommendations and next steps.
6. Most plans, and planning, are helping to improve children's lives and are keeping children safer. Plans are well focused on reducing risks and meeting children's needs. Weaker plans are overly detailed and overwhelming for families, and timescales are not clearly defined. Contingency planning is largely absent, meaning that parents do not understand what action will be taken should progress not be made.
7. Plans are regularly reviewed in core groups, conferences, and child in need meetings, where progress on actions is reviewed, and these are mostly well attended by partners. Social workers draw on a range of specialist services, including domestic abuse support, substance misuse and the effective 'for babies' sake' programme, which provides intensive long-term support for parents pre- and post-birth. The increased use of family group conferences is helping to build longer-term resilience and support earlier permanence planning, and is enabling families to have a meaningful influence on decisions about their lives.
8. The prevalence of neglect is high in Blackpool. For some children who have experienced long-term neglect, planning is less effective, with insufficient focus on the impact of interventions and what is changing for children. For some of these children, this delays escalation to the pre-proceedings stage of the PLO.

Leaders have strengthened the tracking and monitoring of the PLO and are working with other local authorities in the region to further improve this. For some children, pre-proceedings are well used, enabling children to be diverted from proceedings when it is safe to do so, or leading to a decision to initiate proceedings if necessary. A significant proportion of children in pre-proceedings have been in this stage of the PLO for a lengthy period. Planning focuses on the pursuit of parental engagement rather than taking more timely and authoritative action, and these children are left in harmful situations for too long.

9. Social workers know their children well and develop strong relationships with them. Children are regularly seen, in line with presenting needs, and visits are responsive to changes in circumstances. Children's experiences are explored through creative direct work, as well as meaningful conversations to test the impact of their plans.
10. Capacity issues in the children with complex needs team leads to delays in the completion of assessments for disabled children. This prevents children and families from receiving timely services and having their needs met. When safeguarding concerns arise, risks are identified and actions taken. The exploration of concerns is not always sufficiently thorough to inform decision-making.
11. Children who live in private fostering arrangements have their day-to-day needs well met. Social workers visit children regularly and ascertain their wishes and feelings, ensuring that they feel safe and settled where they live. However, statutory checks are not completed in a timely way, or at all, for these children living in private fostering arrangements. Leaders have recently identified that this aspect of the service has deteriorated and have strengthened systems to address this.
12. Robust systems are in place for children who are electively home educated and for those who go missing from education. Routine checks are completed to track children missing from education to ensure that they are safeguarded. A very small number of children who are subject to child in need or child protection planning are electively home educated due to delays in accessing specialist provision. These children are regularly monitored.
13. Children and adults up to the age of 25 who are at risk of exploitation receive an excellent service from the Awaken team. The response is prompt, well coordinated and effective. Assessments are thorough, timely and holistic, and consider any strengths and concerns. The progress and impact of plans are regularly reviewed, and this targeted support is reducing risks to children. When children go missing from home or care, the response from this team is effective. Daily multi-agency exploitation and missing-from-care meetings quickly identify concerns, and information is shared to inform next steps. Return home interviews are timely and explore well why children go missing.

Appropriate action is taken to reduce episodes of children going missing, thus keeping children safer. This has significantly improved since 2018.

14. The offer to children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless has been significantly strengthened. Children are well supported and now understand their rights to enter care. Young people who appropriately choose supported housing can access the same benefits as in the care leavers offer.
15. The management of allegations against professionals is robust and is keeping children safer.

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

16. Most children in care are making good progress. Permanence is actively pursued and appropriately secured at the earliest opportunity, meaning that children have a sense of security. As young people move to adulthood, they are encouraged to stay with their foster carers until they are ready for greater independence. Care leavers are very well supported, and this has significantly improved since the last inspection.
17. Children only come into care when other options are not safe or appropriate to meet their needs. If a decision is made for them to return home, this is usually progressed in a timely way.
18. Children live with their brothers and sisters when this is right for them. Where this is not appropriate, there is well-considered planning about how, and when, they should see one another. Family time is led by children's views, wishes and feelings, and in accordance with children's needs. Social workers are helping children maintain relationships with those who are important to them, and these arrangements are routinely reviewed and amended when needed.
19. Social workers know their children well. They develop meaningful relationships with children, parents and carers. Direct work is a strength, providing social workers with great insight into children's experiences, leading to timely and thorough assessments and planning. Visiting frequency is responsive to children's needs, and social workers engage children through creative direct work as well as helping them to understand their experiences, including their journey into care.
20. Care plans are detailed and focused on meeting children's needs, informed by up-to-date and thorough assessments. Plans are regularly reviewed and sensitively written to children. Independent reviewing officers challenge issues and delays to good effect. Children contribute to their reviews in person or through advocates, ensuring they influence key decisions about their lives.
21. Children's ongoing and urgent physical health needs are well met, including those of children who have complex medical needs. However, too many

children in care have not had recent dental checks, meaning their short and longer-term dental health is not sufficiently addressed. Children who experience a mental health crisis are rapidly assessed and provided with short-term interventions. The co-located mental health adviser offers signposting and individual direction to social workers and carers, as well as direct support to a small number of children. Some children experience delays in having their needs for therapeutic support met, because there are insufficient services to meet local needs. Senior managers have challenged health partners regarding these issues, as well as the need to improve the quality of written health assessments. Action is being taken to address emotional health service shortfalls, including the local authority commissioning an additional psychologist post.

22. The headteacher of the virtual school and their team provide an appropriate range of support and guidance for children who are in care. The team works closely with school leaders to improve the quality of children's personal education plans (PEPs). This is improving outcomes for primary school children, who make good progress. The PEPs for children of secondary school age do not always have clearly defined targets that help children to progress well. The creative use of pupil premium funding helps to mitigate some of the impact of weaker planning for children, including the use of academic mentors and resilience workers, who are supporting improved academic achievement.
23. Planning for permanence, including through adoption and special guardianship, is timely and effective for the vast majority of children. Not all children with plans for long-term fostering have had their home long-term matched, and leaders have streamlined systems to progress this.
24. The majority of children live in homes that meet their assessed needs. Children who live with long-term foster carers are well supported and enjoy all the benefits of family life, including family holidays and a range of leisure and social activities.
25. Children aged 16 and 17 who live in supported accommodation are provided with support that meets their needs. These children are helped effectively to develop their independence skills and encouraged in their education, or to enter employment. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are provided with suitable and timely accommodation, tailored to meet their specific needs. Most of these children are placed out of area, to enable them to live in communities that meet their cultural needs. When children live outside Blackpool, they receive the same level of support and services as children living in Blackpool.
26. Assessments of potential foster carers are thorough and approved foster carers feel well supported. The fostering service has worked hard to ensure that approvals take into account foster carers skills and abilities, and it has significantly reduced the number of carers with exemptions for additional children. The focus has been on improving the quality of foster homes, although this has led to some foster carers resigning. While the fostering

service has increased the number of new carers, the net number of mainstream carers has fallen, and this has impacted on the sufficiency of homes for children. A current lack of foster homes means that a very small number of children live in residential homes, when this is not in line with their assessed needs. There is tight senior management grip at the point of placing these children and regular monitoring while searches for the most appropriate homes continue.

27. Placement stability has started to improve as leaders have specifically prioritised this area. When there are issues or concerns that make children's placements unstable, they are identified early, and support is offered to try and prevent the placement ending.
28. Adoption work is strong. Children with plans for adoption are placed with adoptive parents at the earliest opportunity. The regional adoption agency (Adoption Lancashire and Blackpool) is providing good-quality recruitment, assessment, and support to adopters. Assessments are comprehensive and include detailed analysis. Adopters feel fully supported. The adoption panel provides robust quality assurance of adoption plans, so that children are placed with adopters who can meet their long-term needs. Post-adoption support is of high quality.
29. One young person is living in an unregistered children's home. This is not a suitable placement and the oversight of this has not been sufficiently robust.
30. The support for care leavers is strong and has significantly improved since the last inspection. Transition planning now starts early, with personal advisers allocated and working alongside social workers before children turn 16. Children in care are supported to develop independence skills at an appropriate pace. Transition plans are fully formed, and firm arrangements are secured before children reach 18 years of age. This ensures that children, including disabled children with complex support packages, are clear about their plans before they reach adulthood. Young people are provided with the necessary documents they need as they move into adulthood, including their health histories.
31. Pathway plans are mostly co-produced and appropriately detailed, and clearly define outcomes for young people. These outcomes are routinely reviewed through multi-agency meetings. Planning for care leavers who are vulnerable, including those in custody, is robust and effective.
32. Personal advisers are creative and determined in staying in touch with their young people. They support care leavers, acting as good parents to secure high-quality homes, provide the right health support and meet their needs, irrespective of age. Despite ongoing sufficiency challenges in the number of fostering homes, young people are actively encouraged to stay with their carers until they feel ready to move to greater independence.

33. Personal advisers are aspirational and are strong advocates for young people. They appropriately challenge partners and escalate issues when necessary to ensure that positive outcomes are achieved. Support at a corporate and individual level in creating opportunities for young people to access education, training and employment is impressive, with numbers notably above those of both statistical neighbours and England averages.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: requires improvement to be good

34. Since the last Ofsted inspection in November 2018, when services for children were judged inadequate overall, progress has been made across all aspects of the service, from a significantly low base. Improvements have been made because of strong corporate commitment and determined leaders. There is an improved early help offer, the front door is stronger, and core social work practice is mostly strong. Children in care and care leavers are very well supported, and many children's lives are improving. Leaders understand that children's social care is still on a journey of improvement, and there is still more to do to ensure that some of the most vulnerable children receive an effective safeguarding response from managers and partners.
35. While most children in Blackpool now receive support that is responsive to risk and need, there remain pockets of poorer practice with some children, due to a combination of factors. Although partnerships are improving, they are not where they need to be to support an effective response to children suffering long-term neglect. For some of these children, an over-focus on adults and parental engagement is leaving them in harmful situations for too long. Decision-making for some children experiencing domestic abuse, and those with complex needs, is not sufficiently informed. A lack of suitable placements means that some children are not living in homes that suit their assessed needs.
36. There is an incremental approach to improvement. Core foundations are now in place, and this is supporting sustainable improvements. Substantial council financial investment has enabled a service restructure, as well as a relentless focus on expanding the workforce. This is now reducing caseloads for most, but not all, teams and increasing managerial capacity across the service.
37. The chief executive officer is holding to account all services across the council to support improvements for children and families, as well as using the council's corporate influence to create and secure opportunities for care leavers. As a result, many young people access employment or training and a range of suitable and supported housing options across Blackpool.
38. The current DCS took up the post in April 2021, bringing ambition and clear vision. She has accelerated the pace of improvement, supported by the new assistant director. Staff and partnerships are re-energised and share a collective ambition to provide high-quality services for their children.

39. Strengthened partnerships are improving the lives of many children and young people. There is now a highly effective multi-agency response for children at risk of exploitation and those who present as homeless. The early help and neglect strategies are providing a shared strategic vision, which is leading to more children being supported at the earliest opportunity, reducing the need for social care intervention.
40. Not all partners are supporting a consistently robust response to some children. Given the additional complexities that poverty and high deprivation bring for children experiencing long-term neglect, there are families who need longer-term sustained multi-agency support. Leaders recognise that while their current practice model provides a unified approach to working with families, this is not always effective in ensuring that children's experiences are the primary focus in decision-making. Leaders are currently considering social work models that they believe will take them to the next level of improvement.
41. Leaders have an enhanced line of sight of frontline practice. Performance management has been significantly strengthened through a coherent framework. This is now starting to be used more intelligently, and case auditing is well established. The vast majority of audits are thorough, accurately evaluating children's experiences. Leaders are aware that there is more to do to move corrective actions in audits away from compliance to improving the quality of social work practice and improving outcomes for children.
42. Although increased management capacity has led to intensified management oversight at critical decision points, this is not sufficiently robust across the service. There are still some areas of weaker practice where there has not been sufficient management grip and oversight to safeguard children. For example, there has been insufficient oversight of children who live in unregistered children's homes and those who are privately fostered, to ensure appropriate checks are timely and completed. There has been insufficient scrutiny to test the quality of decision-making in the newly established MARAC team, and to better understand the quality of practice for disabled children served by the children with complex needs team.
43. Sufficiency of appropriate homes for children in care is a challenge in Blackpool, and leaders understand very well the impact this is having on placement stability and the increased use of residential care for some young children. Appropriate and assertive action has been taken to focus on the quality of provision, resulting in a reduction in the number of fostering homes. More recent fostering recruitment activity is effective and, positively, numerous carers are currently being assessed.
44. Leaders' appetite for learning is palpable. They demonstrate honesty and professional integrity, maximising opportunities to understand, learn and improve practice. External scrutiny from improvement partners, and through monitoring visits, has been used to continuously reshape improvement plans, with the getting to good improvement board testing and monitoring progress.

Co-production between leaders, families, children, and the workforce is highly valued. This is shaping how services are delivered, developing new initiatives, and influencing priorities. Some children and young people regularly attend 'Just Us', the Children in Care Council, sharing their views with the corporate parenting board. They are proud of the influence they have had on service development, such as the terminology used by professionals.

45. A relentless and unwavering focus on recruitment and retention by the DCS is now leading to a more stable and committed workforce. This continues to be both a priority and a challenge. Reduced caseloads in many teams are enabling social workers to invest in strong relationships with their children, leading to creative and responsive direct work. Blackpool's dependency on agency workers and a previously high turnover of staff have significantly reduced. Although caseloads are reducing, this is not consistent across the service. Higher caseloads in the strengthening and supporting families' teams, and the supporting our children teams, mean that staff are routinely working additional hours. Capacity issues in the children with complex needs team are impacting on social workers' ability to undertake timely assessments or complete core social work tasks.
46. The introduction of a leadership academy is supporting and nurturing managers. This is providing the training and tools to improve managerial oversight. Supervision is regular and more reflective, but not used consistently well to improve children's lives.
47. The DCS and assistant director have taken great care and effort in changing the culture in Blackpool to one of engagement, respect, and high support. Social workers are proud to work for Blackpool and have greater confidence in their practice. Leaders invest in staff's continuous professional development through targeted training, reflective group sessions and learning circles, where findings from audits are shared across the workforce. Staff understand the high expectations for practice standards and now feel safe, valued, and listened to.

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