

# Inspection of Bristol local authority children's services

**Inspection dates:** 16 to 27 January 2023

**Lead inspector:** Tracey Ledger, His Majesty's Inspector

<b>Judgement</b>	<b>Grade</b>
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	Good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

Children and their families do not yet receive consistently good services in Bristol. Leaders have made very real improvements in some areas since the previous inspection, such as the quality of support to children in care and for care leavers. Likewise, children who arrive in Bristol as unaccompanied asylum seekers benefit from effective support. There is more to be done to make sure that children benefit from consistently good support.

While inspectors did not find any children at risk of immediate harm, initial responses for children are inconsistent and, at times, too slow. When referrals are made about children who may be in need or at risk of harm, threshold decision-making is not always appropriate. Consequently, child protection strategy meetings are not timely, and, for some children, these meetings do not happen. Subsequently, some children do not receive a service swiftly enough that responds to the risks they face or meets their needs. A small number of children are left in situations of unassessed risk for too long.

The local authority has not engaged all partner agencies as effectively as possible. For some children, this has limited the timeliness and effectiveness of the support they receive.

Despite several recent changes of leadership and structure, there is a strong and clear vision for Bristol's children's services. Oversight by leaders is hindered by data and performance management arrangements which are not consistently good enough.

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

- The timeliness and consistency with which initial decisions about thresholds for access to services are matched to children's levels of risk and need, to help ensure that they routinely receive timely and proportionate support.
- The timeliness and consistency with which child protection strategy meetings are held, primarily, within the First Assessment Service (FAS) when children may be at risk of significant harm.
- The timeliness of initial health assessments for children coming into care.
- The reliability and effectiveness of performance management and quality assurance arrangements.
- The consistency and effectiveness of assessments and support to children living in private fostering arrangements.
- The effectiveness of some aspects of joint working with partner agencies, in particular health and the police.

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

1. The FAS, which acts as a 'front door' that receives contacts about children who may benefit from early help or be in need or at risk of harm, does not always apply initial thresholds about the level of children's risk and needs appropriately. At times, initial contacts about children do not progress to be accepted as referrals quickly enough. This creates delay for some children to receive the help and support they need. This leaves a small number of children in situations of potential and unassessed risk.
2. The multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) that sits within the FAS is underdeveloped and underutilised. Because of this, workers often undertake agency checks outside of MASH arrangements. As a result, information-sharing between agencies is not as timely as it could be. This leads to unnecessary delay for some children while agency checks are completed to inform decisions about next steps. Leaders are aware of these shortfalls and have a plan to address them. The impact of the plan is not yet evident in practice.
3. Mostly, consent is gained from parents to complete further checks with other agencies. It is not always clear from case recording that families understand what this consent is for.
4. Helpful daily meetings between children's social care and the police in the FAS provide opportunity for swift information-sharing. The local authority decides at

these meetings if the information reaches the threshold for a referral to be made. If this is the case, the police make that referral. In respect of children who do not meet the threshold, their information is not recorded by the local authority. This creates an inherent risk that information may not be available to inform the analysis of subsequent contacts about these children.

5. There are effective arrangements to help and safeguard children out of office hours. Workers in the out-of-hours team evaluate risk and levels of need well. They share information quickly with FAS to ensure continuity for children and their families.
6. There is a comprehensive early help service in Bristol. Most children and families receive effective help from a broad range of services, although early help support does not always drive progress at a sufficient pace for all children. When concerns for children's safety increase, they are mostly stepped up to a statutory service in a timely manner. However, for a small number of children who are experiencing neglect, this is not always recognised swiftly enough.
7. Statutory assessments of children are generally strong and pre-birth assessments are of a consistently high quality. Children's needs are assessed thoroughly. Assessments include children and families' views and relevant information from partner agencies, and consider historical information well, so that current concerns are considered within a broader understanding of children's experiences. Most children's plans reflect their needs well.
8. Social workers have high aspirations for, and genuinely care about the children they work with. Social workers generally understand and consider children's individual circumstances and needs well. This is evident within assessments and direct work with children. This includes identity, including their race, religion, language, culture and disability. For example, social workers advocate effectively on behalf of children, such as exploring their identity and prompting others to be respectful of children's wishes.
9. Children's plans mostly identify well the actions necessary to meet children's needs. Plans outline clearly what needs to happen for things to improve.
10. Meetings are held to revise the progress of plans for all children in need. Strong, direct work with children helps to ensure that their views, wishes and feelings are captured effectively and are used to inform meetings and plans. A small number of children experience lengthy delays between meetings. This means that progress is not always reviewed in a timely way for these children and can lead to delay in ensuring that their needs are sufficiently met.
11. For most children, child protection strategy discussions happen at the right time. They are well attended by the right agencies and there is good evidence of thorough and considered planning. Sometimes, actions, including medical assessments, do not happen quickly enough. For a small number of children, these meetings are delayed, or they do not take place. This means that not all

relevant information is shared to support decision-making and children can remain in potential situations of risk for too long.

12. Most child protection enquiries are thorough, timely and effective in identifying the level of risk that children face. For a small number of children, joint investigative work with the police is weaker and there are delays. Not enough social workers have undertaken the 'Achieving Best Evidence' training. This limits their ability to contribute as effectively as they might and to provide professional challenge when this is appropriate.
13. Child protection conferences and core groups are timely and well attended by relevant professionals. Children and families engage well in conferences and contribute their views. Child protection chairs work hard to include children in these meetings. In addition, children are supported effectively to have their voice heard by independent advocates. It is heart-warming to see some children co-chairing their meeting, as this allows their voice to be stronger.
14. Child protection conferences develop a good, shared understanding of the risk of harm to children. Consequently, children's plans set out well what needs to happen to meet their needs. However, not all plans are timebound and measurable.
15. When children's needs escalate, the pre-proceedings element of the Public Law Outline is applied appropriately to help ensure that either children's needs are met, or an application for a care order is made in a timely manner to help ensure their welfare. Letters before proceedings are clear and identify key issues well. However, they are not always written as a letter to the parents, and often lack personalisation.
16. Concerns for children are escalated to court appropriately and mostly at the right time. Both the judiciary and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service speak highly of Bristol with regard to their quality of work within the court arena. Bristol's approach to court proceedings ensures that children have clear plans and court orders in place when they need them.
17. Disabled children have social workers who know them well. Social workers use children's preferred communication methods to understand their situations. Disabled children's needs and risks are identified well and included in plans, which are reviewed regularly. This helps children to make progress in all aspects of their health and development.
18. There are robust procedures to identify and locate children missing in and from education. The Elective Home Education team has protocols and guidance in place for when pupils become electively home educated. The local authority's arrangements to ensure the welfare and safety of children who are electively home educated are not strong enough. An absence of robust systems to share information between education, social care and early help compounds this.

19. The innovative 'Weapons in schools programme', which aims to prevent children from being criminalised should they bring weapons into school, is highly effective. Children are seen as victims and work takes place to try and understand why they carry weapons. The programme has helped ensure that fewer children experience school moves, suspensions and exclusions. This keeps them in sight of key adults and professionals and is a protective measure.
20. The response to children at risk of extra-familial harm, including when they go missing, is mostly strong. A well-established partnership approach means that early signs of exploitation are identified. Action is taken to reduce the risks that children face. Complex child protection strategy meetings help track and monitor risks to groups of vulnerable children. Weaknesses in the accuracy and use of data do, however, limit the ability of managers to identify and have oversight of some of the most vulnerable children.
21. Allegations of abuse or harm by adults in a position of trust are appropriately managed by an experienced local authority designated officer.
22. Assessments of private fostering arrangements are not robust. Not all safeguarding checks are completed prior to children's placements being approved. For example, Disclosure and Barring Service checks are not always received and so do not inform the process. The local authority cannot always be assured that these vulnerable children's needs are being sufficiently well met.
23. The response to children aged 16 and 17 who are homeless is inconsistent. Some children are not helped into safe and secure accommodation at the earliest opportunity. Some children are not afforded an assessment of their immediate vulnerability. Those children who can remain at home safely are helped to do so. Children are not benefiting from joint housing assessments. Leaders are aware that this area of practice requires strengthening.

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

24. Children looked after by the local authority are mostly settled and are making good progress. Most children benefit from consistent caregivers, live in stable homes and their needs are regularly reviewed. Social workers and family support workers care for the children they work with. They are determined to do the best for them.
25. When it is appropriate, children are well supported to return to their parent's or family member's care. Parents receive help to build their confidence and develop their parenting skills. Ongoing bespoke support helps parents and children as they adjust to living together again. When children cannot return home, social workers make sure they keep in touch with family members and those close to them if it is safe for this to happen.

26. Decisions to bring children into care are timely and are appropriately overseen by senior managers. Children who need to come into care in an emergency receive sensitive support from social workers, who provide effective help in times of uncertainty and distress. Extensive thought and attention are evident in planning for children. This includes disabled children, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and those who are placed in kinship arrangements.
27. The unaccompanied asylum-seeking children's specialist team is quite new. Workers in this team quickly build strong relationships with children that are based on trust and a good understanding of children's needs. Workers advocate well for children to help to ensure that they get the support that they need. However, workers do not always see children as often as they, or the children, would like. In part, this is due to the distance away from Bristol that some unaccompanied asylum-seeking children live.
28. Children are successfully encouraged to attend and be involved in their review meetings to an extent that is right for them. This includes some children co-chairing their meetings should they wish to do so. Independent reviewing officers (IROs), who are often the most consistent professional in children's lives, write to children after each meeting. IROs and social workers do well at successfully ensuring that issues raised by children about the things that are important to them are addressed.
29. Children in care have a strong voice, both as individuals and collectively. Children have access to, and make good use of, advocacy and independent visiting services. Children who are part of the children in care council contribute meaningfully to service development.
30. Children's social workers visit them on a regular basis. They make determined efforts to get to know children. Social workers take time to understand children's wishes and feelings. They are there when children need them most. They show dedication, care and affection during times of upset and distress. For example, social workers have sensitively supported children to attend the funerals of close family members.
31. Most children in care attend schools or other meaningful education provisions and are making progress. Most have up-to-date personal education plans and are receiving the targeted support they need to make progress. However, not all unaccompanied asylum-seeking children have timely personal education plans, and this means that these children are not always receiving targeted help with their education in an assessed and planned way.
32. Senior leaders are aware that initial health assessments for children coming into care are significantly delayed. This prevents the identification of possible health conditions at the earliest opportunity. However, review health assessments are timelier. At this stage, children's health needs are identified, and children receive appropriate help to maintain good physical, dental and optical health.

Children who require additional therapeutic needs receive specialist services to help them.

33. The fostering service is effective in its support to foster carers and the children living with them and work is under way to strengthen this further. The local authority has a plan in place to increase its number of foster carers. Recruitment and retention of foster carers remains a challenge. As an incentive and response to the cost-of-living crisis, Bristol has secured improved financial packages for current carers. Foster carers told inspectors about the positive impact this has had. An increase in fees, free gym memberships and other leisure activities, and a cost-of-living grant have been welcomed.
34. The vast majority of children in care live in stable foster placements or children's homes. Not all permanence arrangements for these children are recorded clearly. This is because the long-term plans for children are not always formally agreed in a timely way. The system for overseeing permanence planning is not well developed. Overview at senior management level does not ensure that clear permanence plans are in place for all children. Leaders are aware they have more work to do to ensure that formal decisions are timely.
35. Children experience very little drift and delay in their adoption journey and are well prepared for their new families. Prospective and approved adopters receive good support. They are positive about their experience of the adoption process. Clear records show key decision-making that is both right for children and timely. Social workers demonstrate high levels of skill in how they support and navigate children, their parents and siblings through the adoption process. If needed, documents are translated to ensure that they understand the process.
36. Excellent direct work takes place for children who have a plan for adoption. This helps them to understand their journey and the reasons why they will be living in a new family. For children who are living in permanent homes other than through adoption, life-story work is not always started as quickly or completed to the same very high standard.
37. Mostly, extensive and thorough efforts are made to ensure that children are living in registered children's homes. When children live in unregistered children's homes, the oversight of these arrangements is not rigorous enough. This means that the local authority cannot be sufficiently reassured about how effectively the needs of these vulnerable children are met. Arrangements to visit and to quality assure and check the care that children are receiving are not strong enough. The local authority is not always sufficiently clear about the difference between unregistered and unregulated provision. This has led to a very few children being placed in unregistered children's homes without them being recognised as such.

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

38. Care leavers are very well supported. Thorough and coordinated transitions from previous social workers provide the bedrock for advisers to be able to support care leavers well. Care leavers' personal advisers and support workers know them well. They understand their needs and help them to make good progress in their lives as they move into early adulthood. Personal advisers keep in touch and visit regularly, including with those care leavers who live outside the local authority area and those few who are in custody. The care, compassion and commitment shown by personal advisers and support workers who work with care leavers is visible. This is a standout strength of this service.
39. The local authority provides care leavers with a wide range of regular, inclusive participation activities. These are well attended. Care leavers have a genuine voice in Bristol. They are consulted and they help to shape services and support. They aspire to achieve 'belonging' for all care leavers.
40. A co-constructed multi-agency care leaver offer is easy to understand and sets out the wide range of practical support and entitlements available to care leavers. An enhanced offer is in place for those in custody and for young parents to reflect their unique situations. The mental health support offer is more limited. Not all aspects of the wider offer are fully inclusive for those living out of the local authority area. For example, these young people are not exempt from council tax. While not all young people are fully aware of the local offer, their pathway plans do reflect the offer being used to good effect and care leavers accessing their entitlements.
41. Care leavers receive help to identify their health needs and to access routine health services. They are not helped well to access essential information about their childhood health. This means that they do not always hold all the relevant details they may need to inform their health needs as young adults. Not all personal advisers know about this. There is good and creative use of the personal health budget; for some, it is being used to pay for specialist mental health services, such as counselling, in the absence of a specialist mental health offer. This means that some care leavers must end or self-fund these private arrangements when their personal budget is exhausted.
42. Care leavers have help to keep safe, and robust safety plans help mitigate risk and concerns. For example, there is good support to help protect young adults in unhealthy and unsafe relationships. Likewise, there are high levels of support to protect young adults from exploitation. These safety plans are underpinned by appropriate partnership working with probation, adult services and domestic abuse agencies.
43. Pathway plans are developed with young adults and reflect their aspirations, ambitions and personal situations well. Plans are routinely updated every six months and more frequently when needed. They contain realistic actions and



help to achieve goals. Young adults are encouraged to keep in touch with their family, to make friendships and to take up activities and hobbies.

44. The majority of care leavers live in a range of suitable accommodation. This includes semi-independent living, independent living and 'staying put' with their former foster carers. To help assess suitable accommodation, personal advisers use a creative newly devised independence tool. This tool helps to understand young adults' living skills and emotional readiness for independent living. This helps them to move at the right time and to get the right support. There is also good access to tenancy support.
45. Bristol is working creatively and hard to build new homes. Despite this, housing sufficiency and housing options for care leavers are limited. The local authority is working to address this and to reduce long waits for independent living accommodation. The housing pathway for care leavers leaving custody is not secure. This creates uncertainty and instability at a time of great change. This current pathway does not provide the right support and environment for care leavers moving back into the community.
46. Most care leavers are in education, employment or training (EET). An extensive range of support, well-being coaching and other projects are supporting this well and are leading to encouraging results. This is enabling care leavers to be ready for and to succeed in EET. This approach is supporting them to gain the skills and qualifications that enable them to become financially independent. The offer to care leavers to study at university supports them well both practically and financially. The offer helps care leavers to complete their education and achieve their aspirations to move into their chosen careers.
47. There is inconsistency in how well some care leavers receive support during transitions into adulthood. Personal advisers often have difficulties engaging adult services to work together to support young adults during these times. There is a delay in Care Act assessments, which is having a negative impact for some care leavers and leads to delay in accessing relevant adult services. Leaders are aware of these issues and now have a plan in place to address it. At this stage, the impact is limited.

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

48. Against the backdrop of four people holding the role of the director of children's services in the past 12 months, the newly appointed permanent director has quickly engaged with the local authority's leadership and partner agencies to understand areas for improvement. Within her first few weeks, she has started conversations aimed at ensuring that services for children become more joined up across the council. At this early stage, impact is inevitably limited.
49. Senior leaders have a strong vision for the future of children's services in Bristol. Their aspiration is to ensure that every child and their family receive

consistent and good services when they need them. The delivery of this vision remains a work in progress.

50. In some areas, such as for services for children in care and care leavers, much progress has been made since Ofsted's last inspection in 2018. Most children and young people are receiving a good service that makes a positive difference to their lives. In other areas, children are not receiving consistently good services.
51. Corporate and political support for children's services is improving, but not all members yet provide the strength of scrutiny, challenge and support that could help to improve services for children at a quicker pace. Senior leaders recognise this and are taking steps to support members to become more of an active critical friend, including in the delivery of Bristol's One City arrangements, which are aimed at ensuring that children and young people are a city-wide priority.
52. Senior leaders have instilled an open and learning culture. They have worked with, and continue to work with, several other local authorities to challenge themselves and to gain learning that helps to improve services. This is beginning to make a positive impact for children, for example as a result of a safeguarding assurance service review which was focused on services for care leavers. This gave leaders some helpful insights into the quality and impact of practice and helped to provide a firm foundation on which to progress an improvement plan. This has made a tangible difference in outcomes for care leavers. Although there is more to do, senior leaders mostly know where to focus and what needs to be done to achieve greater consistency of practice.
53. The local authority engages children and young people to help with the planning and shaping of services. Various participation groups are in place that help children to have a voice in Bristol, for example the shadow safeguarding board, which has challenged leaders about the language social workers use, and work is being carried out to address this. Children and young people told inspectors that they generally feel valued and listened to; they see their participation as positive and productive.
54. Leaders have implemented a relationship-based and strengths-focused practice model to help social workers to effect positive change and to reduce risks for children. Although making a positive difference for many children, this is not yet fully driving consistent outcomes for children. More needs to be done to ensure that the improvements achieved in some parts of the service are embedded and benefit all children.
55. Some relationships with key partner agencies have strengthened. Positive partnership working, both at a strategic and practice level, is helping to improve outcomes for many children. There are some areas of practice that need strengthening further. For example, some areas of joint practice with the police in the MASH, achieving best evidence and joint investigative work are not

consistently good enough, as well as with health in respect of the timeliness of initial health assessments for children.

56. Senior leaders mostly know the strengths and weaknesses of their service well. During the inspection, some weaknesses were identified that leaders were not fully aware of, for example shortfalls in private fostering arrangements.
57. Despite some promising work to develop performance and information management further in the future, such as with the 'Think Family Database', senior leaders do not have consistently reliable data and performance information to help them understand practice. While there is a plethora of performance reports, and quality assurance processes to help with oversight, these are not always supporting well enough improvements in the quality and impact of services for children.
58. Since the last inspection, the local authority has strengthened, and is continuing to strengthen, the sufficiency of foster homes, children's homes and other living arrangements for children. This strategy is based on an understanding of the gap between identified needs and resources available. Although some shortfalls remain, this is generally leading to an increased range of suitable accommodation options for children.
59. Senior leaders have introduced a specialist team to work with their increasing number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. This ensures that these vulnerable children are provided with swift support that meets their needs, including their emotional needs. As the team develops, systems have been introduced to ensure that 'soft' intelligence is gathered and shared with other safeguarding agencies, such as the police. This allows leaders to track new and emerging themes and to act to reduce the risks for children.
60. Workforce sufficiency is something senior leaders understand. They recognised when vacancies were increasing and acted. Effective workforce recruitment and development, including a programme of social work apprenticeships, is under way. This is enhanced by good relationships with local universities, and also includes providing placements to students and the successful recruitment of new staff, including through a 'Step-Up' programme. A broad range of support and development opportunities are provided to staff, including to the current cohort of 25 newly qualified social workers.
61. Staff are proud to work in Bristol and celebrate the diversity of the communities that they support. Many have worked in the city for several years. Staff say that they receive good support from accessible managers. They appreciate the broad range of specialist and mandatory training available. Staff told inspectors that they find supervision helpful. However, the quality of supervision varies. It is commonly very brief, task-orientated and not as reflective as it should be. It does not always track agreed actions or explore children's experiences in a systemic way. At times, supervision does not recognise emerging risks for children. There are some examples of stronger supervision. This is mostly, but

not exclusively, teams where the managers know the children and their families well.

62. Social workers' and personal advisers' caseloads are mostly manageable. Caseloads remain too high in some parts of the service and capacity remains a problem for those teams. Leaders have yet to successfully reduce pressure across all teams. This results in a variability of service for some children and their families.

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