

Inspection of Bexley local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 6 to 10 February 2023

Lead inspector: Tom Anthony, His 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	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care	Good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding

Clear strategic direction, strong partnerships and good political and corporate support for children's services have sustained the conditions for frontline practice that makes a significant difference to children's lives. Since the last ILACS inspection, in 2018, leaders have maintained very effective support for children despite increasing demand following the pandemic. They have invested in the service and implemented a coherent strategy to help children at the earliest opportunity, preventing difficulties escalating to a level where more intrusive support is required.

A firmly embedded model of practice means that children and families, practitioners and partner agencies know how services work and understand the expected approach to providing support. A well-trained workforce is improving the lives of children and families. Impressive frontline managers provide carefully considered oversight, setting out in children's records a clear rationale for decisions and directions about what needs to happen. Frontline workers feel safe and supported because of the quality of management oversight and decision-making. Leaders continually address the challenge of achieving continuous improvement. Well-developed quality assurance arrangements and performance information ensure they have a realistic understanding of the areas that need to be improved in order to deliver even more effective services.

What needs to improve?

- The consistency of practice to support children who are privately fostered, 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless and children who are vulnerable to exploitation.
- The pace of improvements for children who are made subject to Public Law Outline (PLO) pre-proceedings.

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

1. Practice with children and families in need of help and protection is strong, resulting in positive experiences and improved lives for most children.
2. Collaborative partnership working within the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) is central to this exemplary service. Robust and prompt management oversight of all incoming contacts results in appropriate actions being initiated without delay. Checks with partner agencies are proportionate and relevant to the area of risk being presented. Children and their families receive the right response at the right time.
3. A consultation phone line provided by the MASH provides valuable support to wider partner agencies. It helps develop their understanding of thresholds and of the actions they need to take if they have a concern about a child. Staff make excellent use of information about periods of social care or early help involvement to better understand the significance of new contacts. This, along with information from partners, informs social workers' recommendations.
4. Managers in the MASH are thoughtful, curious and accountable. They challenge social workers' recommendations where appropriate to ensure that next steps best meet children's needs. Management rationale for decisions is clear. When no further action is the outcome, appropriate advice is provided to families about support services available to them. Parental consent is fully considered, obtained and recorded, both for the contact being made and for inter-agency checks to be carried out. When consent is overridden, the rationale for this is clearly recorded.
5. When management oversight identifies that families would benefit from non-statutory early help, key workers in the Family Wellbeing Service (FWS) undertake high-quality assessments. These capture past worries and current concerns well and identify how to help improve children's experiences.
6. Specialist and detailed work is undertaken by FWS key workers to support children and families affected by domestic abuse, parental mental health concerns, low-level concerns regarding neglect and when there are early signs that a child may be at risk of exploitation.

7. Step-up and step-down processes between the FWS and children's social care are effective. They result in children receiving support at the right level to meet their individual needs. When the threshold is met for a statutory assessment of a child's needs, they are promptly allocated a social worker to undertake this task. Managers provide clear direction at the point of allocation, so that social workers know exactly what they need to do and when. Further management oversight at key points during the assessment helps to ensure that the work progresses without delay.
8. Social workers see children promptly, alone and at a frequency dictated by their level of need. They quickly build relationships with children and their families. Direct work helps workers to understand what children's lives are like. Assessments are thorough. They take full consideration of family history and of the views of relevant family members, professionals involved and children themselves. This results in a detailed analysis of risk and need, including the use of danger statements, and leads to appropriate recommendations being made.
9. Planning is undertaken in partnership with children, their families and partner agencies. Plans are effective in improving children's circumstances. Interventions from a wide range of services, such as positive parenting courses, non-violent resistance programmes, mentoring and systemic family therapy sessions, make a positive difference for many families receiving statutory support.
10. When there are concerns about significant harm, strategy meetings are well attended by relevant partner agencies, and they take place promptly. Strategy meetings are clearly recorded, reflecting high-quality information-sharing that leads to the right decisions and next steps being progressed. Timely child protection enquiries provide a thorough analysis of children's lives and the level of risk they face. This, together with robust management oversight, helps to ensure that children receive the right help and protection. Decisions to progress children's cases to an initial child protection conference are appropriate. Although a small number of conferences are held slightly late, interim safety plans help protect children, and leaders are taking action to prevent delays in establishing multi-agency child protection plans for children who need them.
11. Child-in-need and child protection plans (CP) plans are comprehensive, with clear contingencies in place. Plans are regularly reviewed. Well-attended core groups and child-in-need review meetings, which routinely use scaling to assess concerns, enable children and families to see the progress that they are making. Child protection chairs provide effective oversight of children's progress.
12. Social workers see children who are subject to child-in-need and CP plans regularly. They actively seek children's views and are instrumental in helping families make positive changes. Creative direct work helps children to make

sense of their experiences, understand risk, and know what to do if they become frightened or worried about something happening in their lives.

13. Case management panels, held to review particularly complex children's cases and all children in need and those subject to a child protection plan for longer than six months, support group reflection that prevents drift for children. Group supervision, with clinical input, also helps to unpick children's cases that are 'stuck', promoting case progression.
14. The local authority initiates PLO pre-proceedings appropriately when concerns about children's safety have not reduced, but practice in this area is not driving improvements in some children's lives quickly enough. Some children are subject to PLO pre-proceedings for too long and oversight of their progress is not effective. Social workers do not always write letters before proceedings in language that makes clear to parents the impact of their behaviour on their children, or what they are expected to do. This makes it harder for them to make positive changes.
15. Children with complex disabilities are supported well by specialist workers who have an excellent understanding of the impact of disabilities and the range of agencies and services needed to support children. Children are visited regularly by workers who know them well and who are keen to celebrate their progress. Staff take a holistic approach to supporting families. They help parents to manage and maintain their homes and parenting routines.
16. The local authority and its partners are developing arrangements for children who go missing or are at risk of exploitation, to improve the pace and impact of support that children receive. A new specialist exploitation lead practitioner is an additional expert eye on all children who go missing and those who are at risk of exploitation. This is leading to more effective safety planning. These developments are still embedding and more needs to be done to ensure a consistently timely response for children who are at risk of exploitation.
17. Return home interviews are delivered by targeted youth workers who are curious and analytical. When these happen, they are thorough and provide useful insights into children's experiences, improving safety planning and resulting in targeted actions to reduce the risk of further incidents of children going missing. However, take-up has been patchy. There is more work to do to build on recent improvements and ensure that timely return home interviews contribute to effective plans for all children.
18. The local authority has effective systems for monitoring children who are being educated at home, including those who have an education, health and care plan. Designated safeguarding leads in schools have access to regular training and timely support. Services work well together to keep a close eye on any children who are missing from education, and professionals act quickly to put appropriate provision in place. Arrangements for alternative provision are well

managed and effective. Most children successfully return to mainstream education or progress to other pathways.

19. When children are identified as living in private fostering arrangements, assessments of suitability and of children's needs are detailed, and case work is clear about any worries that need to be addressed. Children are seen regularly and alone. However, a lack of knowledge by workers about private fostering regulations results in some gaps in practice in respect of timely initial visits, suitability letters and reviews of Disclosure and Barring Service checks. This creates the potential for some children's circumstances not being properly assessed or understood.
20. The response to homeless 16- and 17-year-olds is not fully consistent. Not all young people are explicitly made aware of their options and entitlements, and not all management decisions result in timely offers of accommodation when needed.
21. The local authority designated officer (LADO) service is effective, ensuring that allegations against staff and carers are investigated and responded to quickly. This helps to safeguard children effectively.
22. The out-of-hours service responds appropriately to children's needs. Demand is manageable and the focus is on securing children's safety first. Placement availability during out of hours is a significant challenge.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

23. Most children who come into care do so when it is necessary and appropriate.
24. Care plans are comprehensive and accurately reflect children's needs. They set out clear goals in order to support children's development and achievements. Most plans are updated swiftly to reflect changes in children's lives or decisions made at their statutory reviews. Plans are aspirational and aim high for children in care.
25. Practitioners explore children's family networks and their networks of friends rigorously and, when there are no other options, children are well matched to foster carers. Most children live in very settled homes with carers, including connected carers, who can meet their long-term needs. Children make positive progress and enjoy a range of activities and hobbies.
26. Children's health needs are identified well when they come into care and are reviewed regularly. Children receive the vaccinations, dental checks and optician services they need. Most children who require therapeutic input are supported in ways that make a difference, including individual mentoring, systemic therapist input for social workers and foster carers, and, for those

children who require it, individual referral to child and adolescent mental health services.

27. Social workers visit children regularly, underpinning the meaningful and valued relationships they develop with children in care. Case records show that workers are seeing children alone and seeking their views. This helps workers to develop appropriate and detailed plans to support them. However, greater turnover of social workers in the last year has had a tangible impact on children in care. Too many children experience changes of social worker. This affects the progression of care plans, particularly for permanence and life-story work.
28. Strong leadership is at the heart of the virtual school. The headteacher and her staff know children's circumstances very well and work relentlessly to ensure that children and young people, especially those who most need additional support, get a good deal. The service is the linchpin behind the timely, stable, effective and coordinated educational support that children receive. The team is not afraid to pester and challenge where support is not meeting their high expectations, or when children are not getting full-time education or are at risk of exclusion. The service is focused on the right priorities, ensuring that younger children get off to a good start with their reading, and that children from the age of 14 get careers advice and guidance.
29. Impressively, children are central to these discussions and a high proportion of children chair their own personal education planning meetings. Most children and young people attend education well and make good progress in their learning. The virtual school leaders recognise that there is more to do to improve the attendance and educational outcomes of some older children, especially those in Years 10 and 11.
30. When children in care go missing or are vulnerable to exploitation, the timeliness of referral to the multi-agency Children at Risk of Exploitation Specialist Safeguarding Task Group panel is inconsistent. When this does happen promptly, it supports early information-sharing and multi-agency planning. For some children, plans to reduce risks are not effective.
31. The Family Solutions team provides effective support for children and their families and carers through bespoke and targeted work, including life-story work. Systemic consultations with social workers and foster carers strengthen placement stability.
32. Skilled direct work helps children understand why they are in care, and to understand their care plans and contact plans. Life-story work is not starting early enough for some children.
33. Children are supported to keep in contact with important others through facilitated family time, which is regularly reviewed and kept as informal as is possible while protecting children from harm.

34. When children on care orders return to live with their parents, thorough and detailed assessments are undertaken to explain why this is in their best interests and to ensure that risks are properly addressed. Decisions are authorised at a senior level, ensuring robust scrutiny before children return to parents who have previously been assessed as being unable to provide safe care for their children.
35. Skilled and enthusiastic social workers in the Children with Disabilities team know children extremely well. They visit children regularly and undertake creative direct work to ensure that non-verbal children's views are included in planning. Children's life-story books help them understand their journey into care. Excellent coordination and partnership collaboration underpin effective multi-agency packages of support.
36. Despite the evidence of strong practice, some parents of children with complex needs told inspectors that services for children with special educational needs are not developed enough in Bexley, particularly during school holidays, making them feel 'on their own' when looking after and seeking resources for their children.
37. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in care and care leavers are provided with excellent support to help them settle into their communities and build friendships and networks. Their cultural needs are considered carefully. They are given legal advice and support from specialist agencies to pursue immigration claims. They are supported well with their language and learning needs, to attend education and achieve qualifications. Workers are highly attuned and skilfully respond to the impact of trauma and children's emotional and mental health needs.
38. Children's arrangements are reviewed regularly, and their voice can be seen within the records of their reviews. Children are empowered to create their own agendas and chair their own reviews. There is a strong independent review officer (IRO) footprint in their records. Their review decisions are clearly recorded, and they write carefully crafted letters to children, informing them of decisions. Their mid-point meetings with social workers between reviews help to quality assure and progress children's plans.
39. Careful placement matching and strong management oversight mean that children live in suitable placements. Children are carefully assessed to ensure that placements, including supported accommodation for some 16- and 17-year-olds, meet their needs. There are no children living in unregistered children's homes.
40. Management oversight of casework is a strength. Permanence panel discussions, IRO escalation and defensible decision-making, and reviews of family and friends' placements are consistently recorded in children's records,

providing a clear audit of decision-making for children. An increase in turnover of social workers has meant that some children have been waiting too long for permanence and should have been matched earlier. Leaders have responded by bringing additional temporary capacity into the service through a managed team. Careful decisions are made to ensure continuity of social worker whenever possible, including allocating specific tasks rather than overall case responsibility. Leaders maintain a clear line of sight to the practice of this team through existing review panels and moderation of audits. In this way, they mitigate the risks of less effective support being provided to children from this interim service.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: outstanding

41. Care leavers receive a remarkable level of support, which remains fully in place until they become 25. This includes the local authority paying their council tax until they are 25, regardless of where they live, and providing significant and tangible support for them.
42. Highly committed personal advisers make a real difference to care leavers' lives. Young people are very positive about the support their personal advisers provide and told inspectors that advisers respond quickly to their needs. Personal advisers are genuinely interested in care leavers' well-being. Their visits are at a frequency consistent with levels of need, and they are well recorded, providing evidence of compassionate, focused conversations. When young people's needs increase or risks escalate, levels of support increase. Personal advisers are tirelessly persistent in their efforts to make contact when young people have been reluctant to engage. As a result, almost all care leavers receive ongoing support until they become 25. There is some variability in when personal advisers are allocated to young people. Some young people are not able to start building a relationship with their personal adviser much before they become 18.
43. Young people's pathway plans are thorough, holistic and reflect their individual circumstances and needs well. Plans are created with care leavers, resulting in more relevant actions to improve their well-being. Most, although not all, are reviewed when care leavers' circumstances change or needs escalate.
44. Care leavers' physical and emotional health needs are identified well in their pathway plans. Plans contain links to services where care leavers can access health support. Specialist practitioners within the local authority's leaving care teams strengthen the offer of support for young people's emotional health. There is effective and appropriate liaison with adult services when care leavers meet the criteria for adult social care or health support. Not all care leavers have copies of their health histories, although the high level of support they continue to receive until the age of 25 means there are many opportunities for them to request support or access information.

45. Personal advisers fully understand the importance of care leavers engaging in education, employment or training (EET) activities, and they work to continuously expand the opportunities available to them. An EET panel focuses support for care leavers who are not in such activities. Specialist support includes input from a Department of Work and Pensions worker and a dedicated specialist EET adviser.
46. Practitioners help care leavers to develop the skills necessary to navigate the challenges and opportunities of adult life. Practitioners' use of an independence toolkit to assess whether care leavers have the skills to manage and sustain their own tenancies provides practitioners with the confidence that it is the right time for the transition into independent housing. Accommodation is mostly consistent with the level of support care leavers need.
47. Young people in custody are well supported and visited frequently. There is effective planning to deliver support when they are released. Care leavers attending higher education establishments also receive positive levels of support, and they can return to accommodation in the local area outside term time.
48. When there are concerns about the safety of care leavers, risk assessments are undertaken that identify risks well and inform safety plans that are promptly put in place. There has been some variability in the pace and response to concerns about exploitation. Leaders have commissioned a specialist service through which extensive efforts are being made to build relationships with some of the most vulnerable young adults. The additional intensive support being provided is of real benefit to care leavers with higher levels of need.
49. Care leavers who become parents receive increased support, including more frequent visiting. If care leavers' children are the subject of child protection plans, workers for both parent and child are clear about their responsibilities. They work closely together, including attendance at core group meetings, without losing sight of their respective priorities.
50. When contact is lost with care leavers, personal advisers are remarkably persistent in their efforts to re-establish contact with them. There is, however, some inconsistency in the frequency and quality of management oversight of such situations.
51. The local authority has fully involved care leavers in creating the local offer. The offer is succinct, with limited detail about the help available for young people with specific needs, such as young parents or unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people.

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

52. Proactive and agile political, corporate and operational leadership provides effective strategic direction for children's services. This is firmly rooted in an ambition to provide help at the earliest opportunity and to deliver high-quality support to children in care and care leavers up to the age of 25. Senior leaders in children's services have excellent oversight of frontline practice. The director of children's services, elected members and the chief executive all make it their business to visit children and care leavers, so that they can see first-hand how well children and young people are being supported.
53. Partnership arrangements are strong. Children, families, schools and Cafcass (Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service) staff give very positive feedback about the level of communication and joint working in Bexley. This helps children. A well-organised, well-led safeguarding partnership, with an impressive independent scrutineer, recognises key areas of need in practice and provides challenge to improve services for children and families. Across the partnership, leaders demonstrate their willingness to place the child at the centre of activity and to overcome organisational barriers to doing the right thing for the right children at the right time. The MASH in Bexley is a strong example of the way in which effective strategic partnerships have enabled a very successful multi-agency operation.
54. The council is an ambitious and aspirational corporate parent. Like all good parents, it knows that there are always things that could be done differently or better to improve outcomes for children. Leaders have enhanced the housing opportunities for care leavers, significantly increasing the number of young people who have been offered social housing over the last four years. They have developed a new protocol, created new posts and designed joint activity to improve the way in which children's services and housing colleagues work together.
55. An openness to external scrutiny and willingness to innovate is evident in a broad range of developments and services that have been commissioned. It is clear from the use of audits and internal reviews, as well as the decisions to try new ways of supporting children, that leaders are committed to continual service improvements.
56. A well-developed range of audit activity helps leaders maintain a clear line of sight to frontline practice. Effective and thorough audit moderation activity picks up gaps in case work. This helps children and their families to benefit from audit activity.
57. A comprehensive and detailed range of performance information is used effectively at different tiers of the organisation to understand performance and enable action to be directed where it is needed. This is not yet preventing drift

for a small number of children, including some children who are subject to PLO pre-proceedings, or ensuring permanence for some children in care. Leaders know the areas where improvements need to be made and have taken steps, including creating additional specialist exploitation roles, to drive improvements.

58. Recruitment and retention of a suitably qualified workforce is an absolute priority for leaders in Bexley. The local authority has been experiencing a higher turnover of staff than in the past, which has been having a direct impact on the support that is provided, particularly for children in care. Leaders are engaged in a wide range of activities to ensure that there are sufficient numbers of practitioners, including through Frontline and Step-Up programmes, as well as sponsoring workers from abroad. While there is some variation between teams, they have maintained reasonable caseloads across the system.
59. Social workers have regular supervision, which is well recorded and reflective, and an impressive level of management recording is evident on children's records. In addition to regular practice supervision, social workers are supported by regular team meetings and group supervisions facilitated by the systemic practitioner in order to support more complex casework. This range of high-quality supervision and support helps practitioners to make a difference for children and their families.
60. A broad range of training and development is on offer to support workers to continually develop their skills and knowledge. 'Champions' in teams across the service, including within the MASH, have developed enhanced understanding of particular areas. The chosen practice model in Bexley is fully embedded across all parts of the system. This provides a coherent approach to supporting children and their families, and means that children, families and other agencies know and understand how services operate.
61. Many staff with whom inspectors spoke have a strong loyalty to Bexley. They readily describe why they enjoy working in the borough, referring particularly to easy access to managers, a high level of management oversight and support, good communication and joint working with internal and external partners.
62. Inspectors met with an impressive group of children in care and care leavers, who spoke positively about the care and support they have received.

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