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Cathi Hadley  
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Dear Cathi

### **Monitoring visit to Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP) children's services on 21 and 22 March 2023. This was the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in December 2021. His Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Steve Lowe and John Roughton.

#### **Areas covered by the visit**

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- The recruitment and retention of a workforce that is experienced, competent and confident to deliver improvements, so that children no longer have multiple changes of social worker or personal adviser.
- The quality of practice, in particular, assessment, planning, emotional support to children in care and the recording of children's views.
- The impact of quality assurance and management oversight on the standard of social work practice and progressing work effectively to avoid delay for children.
- The overview of children's attainment and progress by the virtual school.
- The consideration, and securing, of permanence for children in care.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

#### **Headline findings**

This is the third monitoring visit since the last inspection, when BCP children's social care was found to be inadequate in all areas, except for children in care and care

leavers. The focus of this visit was on children who have recently come into care, including the significant number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) initially placed as adults in hotels in Bournemouth in recent months.

The majority of children in care have too many changes of social worker because of staff turnover. As a result, they are not always visited with a clear purpose and securing a permanent home for them takes too long. This is starting to improve following changes in senior personnel, but only in very recent months. The quality of social work still varies too much, but UASC in particular receive a quick and sensitive service. Senior leaders know the strengths and weaknesses in the service well and have taken immediate steps to improve children's experiences, and positive steps to increase the number of permanent staff are starting to gain traction.

### **Findings and evaluation of progress**

Senior leaders have given additional scrutiny to the experiences of children in care since the last monitoring visit. Previously, high staff turnover, sickness and poor management oversight led to many children in care being seen by several different social workers. A small but significant number of children had no allocated social worker for several months. Since bringing in an experienced interim director for children in care and permanence at the end of 2022, a focus on practice fundamentals and improved visibility has increased staff morale and confidence. Additional capacity was provided quickly, and the situation is recovering with increasing adherence to the basics of good social work. Children are being visited more regularly and with more purpose, and reviews are now timely. However, this is yet to translate into consistent, effective planning with a focus on permanence for children.

Because of a high turnover of staff, the support children receive relies too heavily on the quality of individual social workers and frontline managers, rather than a consistent response based on a well understood model of practice. In better examples of social work practice, which are mainly found in more settled specialist teams such as the court and children with a disability teams, children's views inform well-thought out plans that are centred on the child. In children in care teams, there are pockets of better practice but this is inconsistent, with large gaps in recording and supervision resulting in poor planning.

Weekly review and tracking of children's progress by a service manager is starting to focus social workers' practice on the importance of permanence for children. Permanence is now routinely considered at or before the child's second review, which is an improvement. However, too many children have a permanence plan that is unrealistic or vague. Beyond the child's second review, these plans are not routinely reviewed or updated. Although there has been a small improvement, the council's own performance reports show that only 40% of over 500 children in care have achieved permanence. While the number of children being adopted compares

well with other local authorities, the use of special guardianship orders (SGOs) and other routes out of care is low.

A substantial increase in the number of UASC being placed in BCP undoubtedly adds pressure to a service already under strain. The response to those young people has been timely and sensitive. Managers at all levels have made themselves available to secure safe transfers from hotels to supported accommodation, which is scrutinised by commissioners and independent reviewing officers (IROs), among others. Interpreters are used consistently, and religious practice is prioritised when necessary. However, safety assessments are not routine when moving children to new settings as the volume is so high, resulting in unassessed risk when children move into their new accommodation. Although there are some gaps, the records when completed are personalised and help young people make sense of the situation they find themselves in.

Since the ILACS inspection, the virtual school has improved the mapping and analysis of attainment for children at all stages of their education. Quarterly reports now clearly map out the areas of concern, with corresponding strategies to support children. The addition of a new deputy headteacher has supported more regular oversight of children's progress, including weekly oversight of children living in unregistered children's homes, those in need of planned and unplanned moves and children on the verge of exclusion. The influx of UASC has been an undoubted additional pressure, with a largely successful response to finding education beyond English for speakers of other languages.

When all other options have been exhausted, senior leaders authorise the use of unregistered children's homes for a small number of children. Such placements are clearly not appropriate for children. However, there are now effective monitoring and scrutiny arrangements in place to ensure that children's circumstances are carefully overseen. Weekly meetings review progress, and these both support providers to register with Ofsted and galvanise the search for suitable alternatives, and minimise the length of time children remain in these settings. These children are visited by their social workers and IROs in line with their needs, risk assessments are undertaken and reviewed, and commissioners visit the settings monthly to review contractual compliance.

Following a dip at the end of 2022, eight out of 10 children in care now have their reviews on time and almost all of them participate in some way. Children have contact with their IROs between reviews. When they have a long-term relationship, IROs are also strong advocates for children. Use of the dispute resolution process is increasing where IROs recognise poor practice, and this leads to positive change for children. However, high levels of staff turnover in the IRO service means that this level of challenge is inconsistent.

The quality assurance of social work practice continues to improve. Practice learning reviews (PLRs) are having an increasingly positive impact on practice. Compared to the last monitoring visit, PLRs continue to identify the majority of gaps in practice,

and auditor confidence is improving. Increasingly, this translates into actions for social workers and their supervisors which are completed within set timescales, but the direct impact on children's lives in their time frame is yet to be fully realised.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Steve Lowe  
**His Majesty's Inspector**