

7 September 2023

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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 2 and 3 August 2023. This was the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in December 2021. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Steve Lowe and Michelle Woodward.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made to services for children in care, with a particular focus on the following areas in need of improvement 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 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 fourth monitoring visit since Ofsted's inspection in December 2021, when the care and support provided by BCP to children and young people was found to be inadequate in all areas, except for that provided to children in care and care leavers.

Significant progress has been made in establishing a plan for permanence for all children in care. At all levels, and with purposeful leadership, the importance of children having stable and long-term homes is now being discussed, and progressed with greater urgency. Given the recency of these improvements, the achievement of permanence is yet to follow for just under half of children in care, and too many live a long distance from BCP because of insufficient choice locally.

The quality of social work is now more consistent but remains predominantly reactive, especially for children with more complex needs. This can lead to delays in the provision of services, in particular education and therapeutic support. However, the high level of commitment and passion from staff to get things right for children is encouraging. Crucially, senior leaders, with political support, now have the financial backing required to continue this positive momentum.

Findings and evaluation of progress

In the children in care (CIC) teams, the concerted focus on practice fundamentals seen during the last visit has started to make a positive difference to children. Social workers know their children well, and use a variety of skills to engage them and get to know them and the people who are significant to them, including absent parents. Visits to children increase when needed, and records are mostly detailed and written to the child. Plans are in place and reviewed regularly and once they have a consistent social worker children make positive relationships with them. Their voices are heard and recorded.

However, there is still work to do to avoid children having too many changes of social worker. On average, children in care have two or three different social workers in a year. Children told inspectors that continuity in social workers is the most important thing to them and they had all experienced changes, often losing people they liked and trusted and so have to repeat their stories too often.

Social workers in the CIC teams take over responsibility for children from the Children and Families First teams at the point that they are likely to be in care longer term. They identify well the most pressing or immediate issues and make progress for children. For example, helping children to understand and develop their identity and brokering relationships between teenagers and their parents to enable a safe return home. For these children, however, this is predominantly a reaction to earlier delay and instability that could have been avoided.

The majority of children live in stable homes. They experience minimum disruption and remain there for several years. This compares well against regional and national averages. Support is provided quickly when there are worries that children's relationships with their carers may be disrupted. The fostering service in BCP provides and supports the carers for about half of children in care, and although there is sometimes a delay in making the decision to look for adopters, once that decision is made, children move relatively quickly into their new homes.

Conversely, almost a third of children in care live more than 20 miles from their original home. As a result, their initial and review health assessments are often delayed and their education suffers due to delays in securing school places in the host local authorities. This number include some unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who are rightly living in places that better cater for their cultural and religious needs.

Underpinning this situation are a sufficiency strategy and action plan that lack cohesion, focus and creativity. Leaders are aware of this and the need to engage key partners such as health in joint commissioning arrangements, but progress is at a very early stage. Efforts to extend corporate and collegiate accountability have made slow progress, in part due to hesitancy based on historically poor relationships. Senior leaders remain confident that social work practice within BCP will become more reliable and that as it does so partners will increasingly stand alongside them to address these shortfalls. However, this is as yet untested. Currently, however, for those children with more complex needs, these shortfalls result in social workers looking at what is available rather than being able to match provision to the needs of individual children.

For children who have been in care some time, and this is by agreement with their parents, there are delays in achieving legal permanence. This includes delays in making applications to court for full care orders and a lack of early discussions with carers about special guardianship orders. However, almost all of these children are living with the right people and plans are in place to maintain their safety.

A small number of children are living in unregistered children's homes. This is clearly not appropriate for children. As an interim measure, senior leaders have multiple measures in place to oversee their safety and to progress moves to suitable registered homes as soon as possible. For those children living in supported accommodation that requires registration and inspection by Ofsted, senior leaders closely monitor their circumstances and are supporting providers to register within the prescribed deadlines.

Social workers react to the immediate needs of children in isolation, especially those children who have been through a break down or are living in unsuitable living arrangements. Due to the often reactive nature of practice, the local authority has not been good at identifying what would prevent further instability and lining up the right education and therapy for children. However, these issues are being captured through the comprehensive quality assurance and practice learning reviews (PLRs), which are now well-embedded and translate into actions for practitioners which are being completed more regularly.

To shift the centre of gravity further towards consistently good practice, senior leaders agree that social workers now need to start looking outwards and forwards with support and challenge from their line managers and independent reviewing

officers. Similarly, PLRs that include partner agencies, children and family members are starting to happen in other service areas but are yet to have an impact for children in care.

Management oversight is recorded clearly on the child's record and supervision is largely regular although inconsistently reflective. When important changes for children take place, there is now more evident and effective oversight through permanence tracker meetings and independent reviewing officers escalating their concerns.

In a shift change, all social workers spoke very positively about the direction of travel, visibility and accessibility of senior leaders. They also spoke about having lower caseloads, more regular supervision and a much clearer vision about how social work should be delivered in BCP. The introduction of more competitive terms and conditions has had a positive effect on recruitment and has helped the local authority to take further steps towards achieving a more permanent workforce.

Children's Rights and the participation of children in decisions about their own lives and the strategic direction of the local authority are clearly a priority in BCP. A recent partnership with Bournemouth University and performance artists is giving children a vehicle to tell their stories in a powerful way. The sense of 'I have a right to be here' in a University setting is helping to raise children's aspirations and sits alongside a successful co-chairing of the corporate parenting committee that is putting children's experiences front and centre.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Steve Lowe
His Majesty's Inspector