

Inspection of Bolton local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 11 to 15 September 2023

Lead inspector: Lisa Walsh, His Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	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	Good

Since the last inspection in 2018, Bolton children's services has continued to provide good-quality services for children in care and care leavers. This progress has been made against a backdrop of increasing need, significant financial pressures and an unprecedented national pandemic.

Progress has been made on the areas for improvement, including the impact of early help, the response to domestic abuse, permanence planning and transitional planning for disabled children.

Although senior leaders have enhanced the early help offer for families and strengthened the response to children at the 'front door', not all children who need help and protection receive a consistently effective service. Capacity issues have affected some of the safeguarding teams, leading to the quality and impact of assessments, plans and management oversight not being consistently good.

A stable and determined children's senior leadership team is supported by elected members who have continued to invest in children's services, with a shared ethos of improving outcomes for Bolton's vulnerable children and children in care.

What needs to improve?

- The quality of child in need and child protection assessments and plans.
- The progression of children's plans during the Public Law Outline process.
- The consistency of safety planning at strategy meetings.
- Social work capacity in all safeguarding teams.

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

1. The integrated front door (IFD) has been strengthened to include early help professionals, to identify children who need support at the earliest opportunity. Children's needs are well understood, and they receive a timely response to prevent concerns escalating. Early help assessments are detailed, with family history well considered so patterns are identified and work appropriately targeted. Children's voices are central in planning and for many children carefully targeted work is making a positive difference to their lives.
2. The majority of children who need help and protection are swiftly and effectively identified through the IFD. Highly experienced social workers screen all concerns and consider history to inform next steps. Partnership support is strong, facilitating timely and appropriate information-sharing. Daily meetings consider children exposed to domestic abuse and immediate actions are identified to keep children safer. Managers review all screening decisions to ensure consistency in the application of appropriate thresholds. Consent is routinely sought or dispensed with when needed. This means that children and families are receiving a proportionate and timely response in relation to their circumstances, including outside normal office hours.
3. When children need protecting, most strategy meetings are timely, with strong multi-agency attendance and decisions underpinned by effective information-sharing. Children are seen quickly by social workers and actions are taken to address concerns. Some children do not benefit from multi-agency safety planning during the period of enquiry. This limits the opportunity for an effective multi-agency response.
4. Some children wait too long between section 47 enquiries and the initial child protection conference. This means that children do not always benefit from a multi-agency plan in a timely way. For some of these children, insufficient consideration is given to safety planning during this extended period.
5. The quality and impact of social work practice are inconsistent. Stronger assessments are detailed, informed by a broad range of multi-agency information, and identify risk and need. Some assessments do not sufficiently

consider history in the context of current concerns. As a result, the most appropriate actions required to meet children's needs are not always identified.

6. The quality of plans is too variable, including for disabled children. Stronger plans are outcome-focused and time-bound, with measurable objectives which address children's needs. While most focus appropriately on risk, weaker plans are too generic, or not sufficiently specific to be assured that children's individual needs are being met. Some plans are not time-bound and lack contingency planning, so parents are not clear what action will be taken if improvements are not made.
7. Children's plans are mostly reviewed through regular, well-attended core group and child-in-need meetings. Many families benefit from a broad range of services, including specialist drug, alcohol and mental health support. There is also a broad range of help for children exposed to domestic abuse, including targeted work. Some children benefit from carefully considered safety planning. Effective work is carried out with children and their families, involving their wider family network in building resilience to reduce concern.
8. Given the complexities of some families in Bolton, many children require cyclical periods of social care involvement. Too many children, however, experience repeated periods of child protection planning due to recurring concerns, especially when neglect or domestic abuse is a feature. Some children are stepped down from child protection planning prematurely, and review child protection conferences do not define what future actions are needed so that children's needs continue to be met.
9. Social workers speak with authority about their children, demonstrating a clear understanding of their lives, worries and needs. While most children are seen in line with expected visiting frequencies, visiting is not always responsive to changes in children's circumstances or sufficiently regular to progress children's plans at pace. Some children benefit from creative direct work in line with their age and understanding. This is empowering children to inform decisions about their lives. Records of visits are carefully written to children so they can understand their circumstances should they wish to review their record later in life.
10. Children living in private fostering arrangements are appropriately assessed and effectively supported, with some securing permanence through special guardianship orders (SGOs) or child arrangements orders.
11. For children missing from education and those who are electively home educated, senior leaders ensure a high level of scrutiny, with an appropriate cycle of monitoring and regular checks at an operational and strategic level. Concerns are escalated if necessary and safeguarding needs identified and addressed.

12. Children at risk of sexual and criminal exploitation receive an effective response from the dedicated complex safeguarding team, helping to keep children safer. Assessments are thorough, identify external harm and support a strengths-based approach to working with children. These are regularly reviewed to understand harm and safety, to inform actions in children's current plans. Direct work is targeted and effective to help children understand risks and encourages diversionary activity while work to disrupt perpetrators is ongoing. Daily meetings support swift sharing of intelligence, informing a multi-agency response.
13. When children go missing from home or care, they receive appropriate and proportionate help. A dedicated coordinator provides an independent overview of all incidents of children going missing. When needed, they trigger safeguarding action and use information to inform disruption activity. Return home interviews provide a solid overview of why children go missing, what happened during this period and how they present on their return. They also give children a chance to reflect on how to keep safe and what is needed to reduce further episodes.
14. The initial recording of allegations against professionals is not consistently clear for the local authority to be assured that the initial response by the local authority designated officer is timely and appropriate. Subsequent meetings do identify appropriate risk management actions.
15. Monitoring of children's progress in the Public Law Outline process is not sufficiently effective. While senior managers have strengthened oversight through the introduction of regular tracking meetings, managers do not sufficiently focus on the progress of the child, to understand if their lives are improving, to inform decision-making. Capacity issues and the need for specialist assessments have resulted in some children experiencing drift and delay. As a result, some children are subject to pre-proceedings for too long. Senior managers recognise there is more work to do to strengthen letters before proceedings to align these with children's plans and to clearly define what needs to improve in children's lives, with clear timescales.
16. Children are supported to remain with their families when it is safe to do so. The edge of care service provides a wide range of effective, intensive support to children, families and foster carers. This service is used well by social workers to strengthen families' resilience and so reduce the need for future statutory services involvement.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

17. Most children come into care only when it is necessary and appropriate to do so. For most children, this is timely and planned following detailed assessments. The judiciary and Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) report positively on the quality and timeliness of applications to court

produced at the start of proceedings. A small number of children experiencing long-term neglect would have benefited from coming into care sooner.

18. When children are unable to remain safely living with their parents, family and friends options are always considered. Where possible, the local authority supports children to live with people they know and trust, or children leaving care and achieving permanence via the pathway of SGOs.
19. Most children have a clear plan of permanence defined by the second review. Children who require permanence through a plan of adoption are matched effectively. When it is in their best interests, brothers and sisters are adopted together. The use of early permanence placements has provided some very young children with stability and security from the earliest opportunity.
20. Social workers complete effective and timely matching reports to ensure that children only move to carers who have the skills to meet their needs. The reports are well written; social workers provide high-quality analysis of their decisions about this proposed placement. This is ratified by managers, who also carefully review these decisions. Any children returning to read their records at a later stage will have a good understanding of the rationale for this decision made about them and why.
21. Children are mostly visited by social workers at a frequency that enables them to build positive relationships. For younger children, social workers use observation well to understand the child's world. Direct work supports children to establish trust with their social workers. Social workers have mostly developed long-standing and effective relationships with parents and carers.
22. Plans for children in care are reviewed effectively by independent reviewing officers (IROs). IROs have strong oversight of children's plans through visiting children and liaising with social workers. This helps ensure that children's plans are realistic and based on children's wishes. Reviews take place at a time and place to ensure that children can attend. Some children chair their own reviews. Plans and minutes of these reviews are clearly written to the child, with easy-to-track actions to support improving the child's outcomes. When there are concerns or delay, IROs appropriately challenge practice via an effective escalation process.
23. Children are well supported when they return home under placement with parents' arrangements, but some have been living in these arrangements for too long, due to delay in discharging court orders.
24. Family time for children is based on children's wishes, with careful and sensitive analysis of risk. This helps children to maintain lifelong relationships with people who are important to them and enhances their sense of identity and self-esteem.

25. Children's participation is a strength in Bolton. Children in care groups have a strong influence on shaping services in Bolton and have regular and meaningful access to senior managers and politicians. This included shadowing the Mayor of Greater Manchester for a day.
26. Children are supported to participate in a wide range of enriching activities. They told inspectors that they love the wide range of different outings they go on and that they make friends and get to meet other children in care from across the region.
27. Leaders in the virtual school have a strong sense of purpose and have high ambitions for looked after children and young people in Bolton. There is a clear focus on promoting the achievement and well-being of all children and young people, with outcomes steadily improving.
28. Children's emotional and mental health needs are well addressed in care planning and supported well by carers. There is an appropriate focus on what support would benefit children with their emotional well-being and transition to adulthood.
29. The introduction of a transitions team for disabled children is supporting more timely adult care needs assessments, to enable earlier planning for adulthood. This is an improvement from the last inspection. Up-to-date assessments inform detailed care plans, which are regularly reviewed and recommendations monitored for completion. Many children who are non-verbal receive the support of an independent advocate, which is helping to better understand children's views.
30. Social workers ensure that support for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is tailored to their individual cultural and religious needs. They seek out the most appropriate homes or accommodation so that children and young people can flourish. These children also have their health and emotional well-being needs well met in Bolton. Their education is promoted, and most are making good progress.
31. Due to sufficiency challenges, particularly for children with the most complex needs, a small number of children live in unregistered children's homes. Leaders have effective oversight of children living in these settings, pending the identification of suitable placements.
32. Most children live in stable foster homes that meet their needs well. For some children they live outside of Bolton due to the lack of suitable placements locally. Social workers consistently respond effectively to the individual needs of children no matter where they live.
33. Assessments of foster carers and connected carers explore key issues, with strong analysis. Once approved, foster carers are well supported by their

supervising social workers. They have access to a comprehensive training programme, helping them to understand the impact of children's experiences.

34. Bolton local authority is part of a regional adoption agency, Adoption Now, supporting children to achieve permanence through adoption. Children are carefully matched with adopters, with decisions scrutinised by an effective panel.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

35. Care leavers are well supported by the local authority into adulthood. Personal advisers (PAs) know their young people well and establish plans that reflect their needs and vulnerabilities. They act as strong advocates and conscientious parents, supporting young people with their transition to adulthood.
36. Pathway plans are completed with care leavers, ensuring that their wishes and feelings are included in planning. The plans themselves are detailed, clearly setting out care leavers' needs and the actions needed to meet these needs.
37. The physical and emotional health needs of care leavers are well met in Bolton. The local authority has been proactive in ensuring that their health needs are supported, by employing an emotional health and well-being practitioner. This is a valuable resource in ensuring that care leavers with more complex emotional health needs are being supported. This is particularly important when care leavers are in the process of transitioning from child and adolescent mental health services to adult mental health services. The worker ensures that care leavers are still being supported while this process is ongoing.
38. Care leavers understand the local offer, which is comprehensive and ensures that young people have access to their statutory entitlements. PAs also ensure that care leavers are clear about their entitlements. The local authority has involved care leavers in the review of the offer. This has led to an increase in the setting-up grant to support care leavers as they move into new accommodation. Care leavers have free access to IT equipment and the internet. The local authority has been innovative in opening its own store for care leavers to select important good-quality items such as white goods at no cost.
39. Most care leavers live in suitable accommodation. There is a strong commitment to 'staying put' arrangements, supporting care leavers to remain with carers who know them well. Most accommodation for care leavers is provided through a commissioned service that supports them into independence. For some care leavers, their choices for further accommodation are limited when their tenancies are at risk. This means that some care leavers move from supported accommodation into independence too soon.

40. The virtual school and children's services have well-established working partnerships with Connexions and the leaving care team, offering an extensive range of positive and proactive work to support care leavers with their next steps in education, training or employment. Care leavers who are not in employment, education or training are proactively supported, through the use of bespoke plans that meet their individual interests, skills and aspirations.
41. When care leavers are at risk of criminal exploitation there is a strong multi-agency response to reduce the risk. The action plans are timely and responsive to the changing needs and the risks facing care leavers.
42. Care leavers who present as more vulnerable receive an effective response from PAs. Care leavers in custody are well supported by the multi-agency group of professionals around them. They are regularly visited by their PAs and receive a responsive plan of support when they leave custody. Action is taken to divert them away from criminal activities and engage them with professionals who can support them in the community.
43. When unaccompanied asylum-seeking children become care leavers, they are supported effectively. This is a real strength. Workers ensure that care leavers' cultural and religious needs are met. They seek out the most appropriate accommodation so that care leavers can feel safe and secure.
44. When care leavers turn 21, their PAs ensure that they know their service entitlements. This allows care leavers to choose the level of support they want according to their individual needs.
45. The care leavers' forum is an enthusiastic and committed group. They have been instrumental in shaping strategic plans and services for care leavers in Bolton and across the Greater Manchester area.

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

46. Children's services continue to benefit from strong support from political leaders. The chief executive and elected members have high aspirations for children, understanding the priorities for children and their responsibilities within the wider partnerships. These aspirations have been backed by ongoing financial investment, albeit in a challenging financial climate.
47. A clear and strong corporate parenting commitment is demonstrated by the local offer for care leavers, which includes enhancements of the leaving care allowance, alongside promoting the recruitment of foster carers and holding events celebrating the achievements of children in care. The council is committed to prioritising care leavers and one of the ways they are doing this is to treat them as if being a care leaver is a protected characteristic. This

approach is part of a wider strategy helping to better understand and respond to the needs of care leavers.

48. Children benefit from a cohesive and collaborative approach with partners. This is reflected in developments at the front door and in the virtual school, and the response to children at risk of exploitation.
49. The local authority has continued to provide good-quality services for children in care and care leavers. In a challenging environment, many service areas have been sustained or improved. This includes children receiving high-quality early help support, a strengthened response to domestic abuse and more timely transitional planning for disabled children. However, for children who need help and protection, capacity issues have impacted negatively on the consistency of social work practice and outcomes for children. Leaders are aware of these shortfalls and have firm plans in place to address social work capacity, including reducing workloads.
50. Senior leaders are committed to ensuring that children's voices are heard and use their experiences to shape services. Leaders actively seek opportunities to create positive experiences for children and young people. For example, children were directly involved in the opening ceremony of the Rugby League World Cup quarter final, giving them treasured memories.
51. The director of children's services (DCS) is a passionate and committed leader, who advocates strongly for children, with an impressive knowledge of their individual experiences. They have continued to provide strong leadership throughout a period of change, with an unrelenting focus on service delivery and the needs of children.
52. Senior leaders welcome scrutiny and challenge from external partners providing them with the opportunity to reflect on current service delivery and make improvements to frontline practice. Leaders have a clear line of sight on children through a range of management activities. This enables them to have a detailed understanding of children's experiences on an individual level. This could be further strengthened by improving the quality of auditing, which is not consistently strong. Leaders recognise this shortfall and during the inspection have refined their response to address the quality of audits. Performance monitoring mechanisms are providing managers at all levels with a good understanding of service data.
53. Against a backdrop of increasing demand, senior leaders have continued to develop and improve sufficiency. They have successfully reconfigured commissioned services to engage meaningfully with providers and build relationships, using their knowledge and understanding of the needs of Bolton children. This has strengthened edge of care services, supporting the safe reduction in the numbers of children in care. The DCS is the strategic lead for

developing placement sufficiency across Greater Manchester, with several projects in development and ambitious plans to keep children living locally.

54. Social workers are well supported and say they feel valued. Senior managers are described as being accessible and supportive. Social workers describe a culture of regular and reflective supervision. However, for workers in safeguarding teams, supervision is not consistently supporting the timely progression of outcomes for children. Leaders recognise this and plans are in place to introduce targeted management training.

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