

Inspection of Barnsley local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 11 to 15 September 2023

Lead inspector: Anna Gravelle, 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

Following the last inspection in 2018, when the local authority was judged good overall, a joint targeted area inspection in 2022 and a focused visit of the Future Directions service in 2023 identified that some children's experiences and overall practice had weakened. Children's services has experienced significant workforce challenges. A high turnover of staff, managers and senior leaders, as well as increased service demand, has resulted in the slight decline in the quality of some services provided to children living in Barnsley in need of help and protection.

Following the appointment of the new executive director 14 months ago, a significant review across all service areas has resulted in a self-evaluation which is an accurate assessment of practice and child experience. This knowledge and action in response is driving improvement across the service, and in areas where practice had previously declined, improvements are now evident and embedding. There is now a strong and effective senior leadership team that has had a positive impact on the quality of social work practice. Considerable financial investment and a seamless alignment of corporate and political accountability have ensured that services for children in care and care leavers continue to be good. Senior leaders recognise there is still more to do to ensure that children in need of help and protection receive a good service and have active improvement plans in place.

What needs to improve?

- The engagement of multi-agency partners, including in key decision-making meetings for children in need of help and protection, and the quality of referrals they make to children's social care.
- The quality of recorded management direction to social workers at the point of referral and within screening.
- The identification and response to children who live in private fostering arrangements.
- The record of achievements and targets within personal education plans.

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

1. Not all children who need help and protection receive a good service. There has been a slight decline in some practice areas since the last inspection. The new executive director and senior leaders have responded quickly to identify new demands and understand where and why improvement is needed. Improvements are starting to have momentum, but there is further work to do to enable impact for all children.
2. The presence of early help workers in the integrated front door (IFD) brings added value and helps to inform effective decision-making. The right thresholds are applied for most children accessing support from early help services, and decisions made at the 'front door' for early help assessment are appropriate. Workers regularly visit children in line with their needs and this helps to build meaningful relationships. Assessments are timely in response to families' needs and resultant plans accurately identify the support required. Not all plans are SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely) enough to help monitor outcomes for children and to review their progress effectively.
3. Most children receive a proportionate response to contacts and referrals received within the IFD. Triage decisions are made by social workers who have the necessary skills and experience. Referrals are appropriately screened, and thresholds to access statutory services are generally applied consistently and appropriately. The quality of the information received from partners, particularly the police, is variable, leading to a high proportion of contacts recorded as information only. Senior leaders are aware of this and are actively addressing this within the partnership and wider regional police force area.
4. Written management oversight of referrals is basic but is mitigated by managers having detailed conversations with workers. At the screening stage, the quality and consistency of direction for social workers from managers regarding next steps are not always clear. IFD social workers capture children's histories and the subsequent impact on their current situation, but this is not yet consistently used to understand experiences for all children. Parental

consent is appropriately considered and recorded. Where consent is not obtained, repeated attempts are made to contact parents, although this is not always evident in records of screening information for fathers.

5. The response to domestic abuse concerns is appropriate in the IFD. There is detailed analysis of families' histories to inform current decision-making. Workers have a solid grasp of the risks to children from witnessing domestic abuse while maintaining a good focus on children's safety. A review of the response to domestic abuse within the IFD has taken place within the partnership. This has led to the agreed physical presence of an independent domestic abuse adviser within the front door and the imminent implementation of a new model of practice to better support survivors and perpetrators. Leaders envisage these actions will add significant value to the identification of risk and support needs.
6. Most children who are at risk of criminal exploitation and gangs are being identified early in the referral process. Children at higher risk of exploitation and wider vulnerabilities receive timely, creative and bespoke support packages coordinated by social workers in the contextual safeguarding team. Social workers are successful in developing relationships with children to help divert them away from being criminally and sexually exploited. Risk assessments and 'find me' plans are regularly updated. Relationships with professional partners are becoming stronger, enabling effective positive diversion activities, mapping activity, hotspot identification and disruption of criminal activity.
7. When children go missing from home or care, return home interviews are mostly timely and identify why children go missing. Return home interviews do not always identify potential risks to children or detail what follow-up actions are needed to reduce further episodes of going missing to help keep children safe. Senior leaders have responded by increasing capacity within the service in line with demand and have strengthened processes in response to contextual harm and information-sharing with police partners.
8. The emergency duty team provides an effective response to children in need of help and protection out of hours. A recent review of the service and increased manager oversight have strengthened practice. Social workers visit children at times of crisis and appropriate checks are undertaken. Strategy meetings take place to determine appropriate multi-agency assessment of risk and next steps for children's safety out of hours.
9. Strategy meetings are timely and are used effectively to understand the needs and situations for children at risk of significant harm. The majority are well attended by partners, with comprehensive recording that makes clear the rationale and multi-agency evidence base for decisions and next steps, including when child protection enquiries are initiated. Historical information is fully evaluated to aid current decision-making for children. Resultant plans address the immediate steps needed to keep children safe.

10. Child protection investigations are completed swiftly and focus on the experiences and impact of potential harm to children, including from physical and emotional abuse. Workers are skilled and experienced at identifying the different types of risk that children face, including from parental new partners living in the home. Workers are persistent in ensuring that concerns about potential injury are followed up, and that children living at different addresses are spoken to as part of enquiries.
11. Assessments for children are strengths-based and demonstrate that social workers understand children's lived experience. Senior leaders recognise there is more work to do to embed the preferred strengths-based model of practice across children's services. Most assessments are detailed, with clear evaluation of strengths and risks, leading to appropriate recommendations for next steps. They contain effective information-gathering from partners that is used to help inform analysis. For most children, family history is accurately understood, including the impact on their current circumstances.
12. For most children in need of help and protection, planning following assessment considers their needs well and results in actions that generally make a positive difference. Actions are specific to children's individual needs. The effectiveness of this planning is weakened as timescales for actions are not consistently evident. Partnership working is not firmly embedded and does not consistently contribute to a reduction of risk or need for children across the service. Core group meetings are held regularly, but attendance from partners is variable and minutes are not consistently available for review to ensure that outcomes are met for children. Senior leaders are currently in consultation with senior members of the partnership to try to address this.
13. Work is in the main evidencing a timely and thorough response to addressing concerns relating to neglect. There are a small number of children for whom a previous lack of professional curiosity has led to the premature ending of support before positive change has embedded. More recently, when children's lives are not improving, they are benefiting from earlier authoritative decisions to escalate into pre-proceedings and swift applications to initiate care proceedings. Within the last six months, senior managers have strengthened the Public Law Outline process through the introduction of review mechanisms, and increased monitoring to minimise drift and delay for children. Letters before proceedings include too much social work and legal jargon, which makes it difficult for families to understand what is required of them to improve children's circumstances.
14. Children are visited at a frequency that meets their needs and level of risk. Social workers ensure that visits are purposeful and include meaningful discussions to help them understand children's aspirations and feelings. Creative and frequent direct work supports children to build trusting relationships with workers. Children are encouraged to take part in activities that will build their confidence and self-esteem.

15. Disabled children and their families benefit from social workers who comprehensively understand their needs. Social workers are creative in developing multi-agency support and care packages for disabled children and their families when they are in crisis.
16. The response to children who are privately fostered is mostly weak. Assessments are descriptive and do not provide assurance that the arrangements are meeting children's needs. Work is not child-focused and does not consider the best interests of children or include wider considerations around parental oversight and agreement to the arrangements. Leaders are aware of these shortfalls and have ensured that there is now a dedicated worker to assess private fostering arrangements. Training and awareness-raising are under way to strengthen practice.
17. Experienced workers understand their responsibilities and demonstrate a robust response to referrals when allegations are made against people working with children. Staff promote awareness of the service and ensure that professionals are trained and understand their responsibilities in protecting children.
18. There are clear procedures, policies and systems in place to check the location of children missing education and those who are electively home educated. These are understood by schools. Leaders carry out their statutory duties to protect children. The virtual school has a comprehensive plan for supporting children with a social worker which extends beyond statutory duties to ensure increased support for children. Weekly monitoring of their attendance is live, and a dedicated learning and engagement mentor works closely with school teams and social workers. There are some gaps in records for those children electively home educated, which does not assist managers with overall oversight of children's progress.
19. When children who are 16 to 17 years old present as homeless, there is a timely and seamless response supported by the homelessness key worker because of the improvements in joint working between housing and children's social care. Outcomes for children are effective, often at times of crisis, facilitated by workers who clearly explain the options available to children, and their rights and entitlements, including to become looked after. Subsequently, some children come into care, while others are supported through mediation to safely remain with their family and family networks.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

20. Decisions for children to enter care are appropriate and timely with clear recorded management rationale. Swift action is taken to find the most appropriate homes for children when they are at risk, or when plans determine this is the right decision. Most children in care live in suitable and stable homes which meet their needs. There is insufficient local provision for children in care with complex needs, including unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who move into the local area through the National Transfer Scheme. Senior leaders

are aware of these issues and are working effectively within the council and with sector partners to create more local capacity for children, or to make safe arrangements for children to live out of area.

21. If it is not possible for children to return to live with their parents, appropriate and timely plans are made for children's permanent care. There is a strong emphasis on the earliest engagement and inclusion of family members. This has recently been further strengthened by routine family group conferencing. Children benefit from extensive efforts by social workers to assess family members and to support children remaining within their family network where it is safe to do so. Children's needs are carefully considered by their social workers, including relationships with their brothers and sisters. This has resulted in an ever-increasing number of children living safely with family and friends, with high numbers of children achieving permanence through special guardianship orders, with enhanced support packages for children and their carers where needed.
22. For those children who leave care and return home to their families where it is safe to do so, there is appropriate assessment, planning, monitoring and support provided to enable successful reunification.
23. There is strong senior management oversight and increased visiting for the small number of children who live in unregistered children's homes. For those children who live in unregistered supported accommodation, senior leaders have been proactive in ensuring that those services have made the required applications to Ofsted.
24. Most children's assessments and care plans comprehensively identify their needs and are regularly reviewed by social workers to monitor their progress in all aspects of their development. Social workers capture children's views about their care and their voices help to shape their care planning. Children understand their rights and entitlements and have access to advocacy and independent visitors should this be needed.
25. The independent reviewing officer (IRO) footprint is visible on children's records and helps ensure progression of children's care plans. Social workers and IROs keep in touch about children's developments and work collaboratively with children. Children are actively involved and encouraged to be part of their reviews by social workers and IROs, which means important decisions about their plans are made with them. A restructure of the IRO service since the last inspection has enabled a much stronger focus on care planning for children in care.
26. Children's health needs are quickly identified and are consistently reviewed. Children access timely dental and optical care. Children who need more specialised emotional support and interventions benefit from swift access to child and adolescent mental health services as there is priority access and ongoing interventions for children in care.

27. Social workers speak confidently and cohesively about the past experiences and needs of children they are working with. They understand children's likes, interests and aspirations because they take time to build trusting relationships with children through frequent visiting in response to children's needs. Children's records are written to them in a warm and sensitive manner, to assist in bringing records alive should children wish to read them in adulthood. Planned, reliable and meaningful direct work with children helps strengthen these relationships and helps children retain stability in their homes.
28. Disabled children in care benefit from stable relationships with their social workers, who visit them regularly. Social workers spoke warmly about children and have a comprehensive understanding of their life experiences, personalities and interests. Children's voices are evident in recordings, and where children have difficulties communicating, social workers are skilled in gathering their wishes and feelings.
29. Family time is routinely promoted and prioritised in children's care plans to ensure that children maintain appropriate family links with those who matter to them. Social workers also go over and above to ensure that safe reconnections are made with family members who may have lost touch. Social workers recognise the importance of the 'Barnsley community' and what this means for individual children's sense of belonging.
30. Most children in care make progress in relation to their attainment across key stages, except for those children in early years. This is linked to a significant number of children with special educational needs and/or disabilities within this cohort. The virtual school is committed to ensuring that every child and young person has access to a quality education. Schools speak highly of the virtual school service. The virtual school is supported by senior leaders in the local authority. While currently personal education plans reflect children's attendance, educational outcomes and achievements, it is difficult to see thereafter the plan for further development or how children's aspirations and targets will be achieved.
31. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive high levels of support to access appropriate accommodation. Most children are making progress in foster care with their education, individual interests and learning English. Cultural and religious needs are prioritised, and children are supported to live out of area if their needs cannot be achieved locally. Personal advisers are persistent in assisting children with their legal status and leave to remain. Social workers do not routinely undertake a written initial assessment of children's situations to understand their experiences and needs. This is mitigated by social workers and personal advisers who know children well and develop suitably focused pathway plans at the outset. Senior leaders had identified this as an area for development prior to this inspection.
32. The fostering service is currently under review. Notwithstanding the challenges within this service, there continues to be a strong emphasis on recruitment,

assessment, training and support for carers. Fostering and adoption panels provide high scrutiny and effective decision-making to safeguard children. The local authority's three hub-based models of support are a real strength and afford foster carers the chance to build cohesive support networks with other families. This builds a community around the child and extends foster family relationships.

33. Adoption planning is actively and carefully considered for children at the earliest opportunity to secure their futures. There has been a decline in the number of children being adopted, which is in line with the national trend and is not reflective of a lack of action on the part of the local authority or regional adoption agency (One Adoption South Yorkshire RAA). Matching is carefully considered, and introductions are based on a full understanding of children's needs. Adopters are supported by enthusiastic and knowledgeable social workers. In preparation for children being adopted, life-story work happens at the earliest opportunity and creative and thoughtful life storybooks are completed to help children understand their childhoods as they grow.
34. Children and young people have a plethora of opportunities to be involved in shaping the future of children's services and providing their views, including through the Care4us and care leaver groups. They are involved in interviews of senior leaders, and they are also invited to some senior leadership meetings. Children enjoy the experience of afternoon tea and cake with the mayor and speak positively about this opportunity to meet with and share their thoughts with leaders and councillors.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

35. The experiences and progress of care leavers have markedly improved since the focused visit earlier this year, where some areas for improvement were identified. The response to young people is now consistently good. An increase in capacity through the creation of another Future Directions team has significantly improved care leavers' experiences and the support available to them.
36. Children in care are increasingly being allocated a personal adviser shortly after they are 16 years of age. This arrangement allows young people to develop meaningful and trusting relationships with workers who will continue to support and befriend them into adulthood.
37. Personal advisers have a detailed knowledge of young people's needs and histories. There are strong, supportive and respectful relationships between care leavers and their workers. Personal advisers are persistent in making sure that young people receive the right levels of visiting and help that meet their individual needs. Consequently, care leavers are confident in asking for additional help and reassurance when needed.

38. Personal advisers ensure young people's well-being and safety at times of crisis, advocating for them, while also supporting them to develop their independence skills. For those young people who require a higher level of support because of mental health needs, relationship breakdown or those who are parents, their needs are suitably met with high aspirations and nurture from their workers.
39. Young people benefit from timely and regularly reviewed pathway plans that are completed with personal advisers. Not all assessments for care leavers consistently include their aspirations or translate into planning. Senior leaders have identified the quality and consistency of recording within pathway plans and records more generally as an area of improvement.
40. The local offer has been refreshed and there is an accessible and comprehensive guide which care leavers understand. Senior leaders adapt the offer depending on individual needs and bespoke requests are frequently met when requested, including financial support to access private housing and Wi-Fi. Council tax exemption is not provided as standard but a review of this is under way.
41. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who become care leavers receive high levels of practical and emotional support. Personal advisers know their needs and prioritise diversity and culture when considering appropriate accommodation, links to friends and family, and wider support.
42. Professionals have high aspirations for care-experienced young people, encouraging and supporting them to continue their education and training. A considerable number of care leavers are being assisted at university and there are a wide range of education and employment opportunities, including work experience and apprenticeships within the council. Further plans are under way to extend apprenticeships within the council and wider community. The targeted information advice and guidance service is readily available to help care leavers to access a variety of learning and employment opportunities. The local authority's education and employment data requires further refinement and specialist consultants have been sourced to address this issue.
43. Most young people are living in suitable, safe accommodation that meets their needs and receive the right levels of support to help develop their independence and confidence. Where possible, care leavers are encouraged to remain in 'staying put' arrangements with their foster carers to access longer-term help and stability. Sufficiency challenges in relation to accommodation for care leavers are reflected in the experiences of a very small number of young people who need to access accommodation in times of crisis. Leaders have responded within their strategic action plan to develop accommodation options for care leavers locally within the next two years.

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

44. There is strong political support and a cohesive relationship between the corporate and political leadership within the council. A commitment to sustained investment and a prioritisation of children's safety and positive outcomes are palpable and underpin the culture. The lead member for children is an ardent advocate for children, and with the chief executive and executive director for children they operate as an entirety, mirroring their steadfast aim to be 'One Council' with children and young people at its heart.
45. Oversight at corporate parenting and performance boards is unyielding. This enables effective review and scrutiny on areas to further grow and achieve for children across the whole partnership. The collective aim is to make Barnsley 'the place of possibilities' for children and their families. The challenges in the local area are well understood and an accurate understanding of practice by senior leaders is directing improvement. This includes a pledge to further invest in and strengthen edge of care services, and further commitment to increasing apprenticeships for children in care.
46. The chair of the safeguarding partnership recognises the skill of the executive director in bringing partners together and reforming relationships. Leaders are cognisant that they have more to do to continue to strengthen the strategic partnership arrangements needed within service delivery arrangements to protect the most vulnerable children and families. This includes police responses within the IFD and assessment teams, availability of accommodation for children aged over 16 and children in care in the local area, and the response to those children who are privately fostered.
47. The executive director and leaders have a comprehensive understanding of the quality of services provided to children. They have responded swiftly and effectively to prioritise areas of most urgent need within children's services. Leaders have equally managed to retain their sights on more longer-term improvements, successfully guided by the challenge and oversight of the independent development board chair, who holds local authority members and partners to account to drive the quality of practice and pace of change. The self-evaluation demonstrates an accurate, candid and well-rounded analysis of improvement in the previous 12 months and further developments. Notably, the senior leadership team has a solid grasp of the needs of families within Barnsley and services are reflective and aspirational of the local community. A new hub for children and young people is a testament to this and provides practical help and opportunities to socialise. This ensures that children and young people have a sense of community and support in their lives.
48. The majority of children in care live with Barnsley foster carers. Senior leaders recognise the challenges in supporting more children to live locally. The fostering service has undergone redesign and received increased investment, and a newly commissioned marketing consultant is helping to tackle local

sufficiency challenges. Senior leaders are aware that they have more to do to tackle these national challenges and plans are well under way. Substantial investment and expansion within preventative services is enabling a quicker response to help children remain safely within their family networks.

49. An embedded quality assurance framework and detailed tracking and oversight of learning actions are leading further practice improvements across children's services. This is strengthened by the executive director's oversight and involvement in practice audits, which includes visits to families. Social workers are positive about auditing practice and perceive it as a transparent and collaborative learning process from which they benefit.
50. Leaders have experienced strategic and operational challenges since the migration to their new electronic recording system. This has impacted on their ability to consistently gather and analyse data about staff performance and the impact for children and their families. This has resulted in some manual work-arounds. Senior leaders have ensured that this remains a key priority to resolve. Further investment has been ringfenced and the use of external consultants to strengthen the performance management framework is in place. This ensures that senior leaders can reliably provide members and corporate leaders with an accurate and tight grasp of how services are performing and improving children's lives. Nonetheless, there is considerable scrutiny of operational performance by senior leaders through frequent performance clinics and weekly operational meetings.
51. Significant investment in the workforce and an unremitting drive to retain staff through generous incentive schemes have halved the use of agency staff since the arrival of the executive director. A creative and canny approach in converting a considerable number of agency staff to permanent and in attracting staff outside of Barnsley has contributed to this. Consequently, leaders have achieved a reduction in workers' caseloads through a considerable injection of resources across the IFD, EDT, assessment and Future Directions teams. This has undoubtedly led to improved workforce stability and wider improvements to practice for children and young people.
52. Staff in Barnsley benefit from a bespoke and thoughtfully commissioned array of training and resources to help improve practice across children's services resulting from a new practice development hub. A new managers course is also enabling a much sharper focus on practice improvement. Leaders are aware that they have more to do to improve the quality and consistency of supervision across the majority of children's services to create continued progress for children and their families.
53. Staff enjoy working in Barnsley. They feel heard. They collectively speak of the improved changes to practice because of the visibility and involvement of the executive director and senior leadership team, which is described as commonplace. The executive director, through their determination and vision, has created a culture of learning, honesty and care within the workforce.

Operational policies are frequently updated and provide clarity and direction. The approachability of senior leaders and quality of training are seen as considerable strengths by staff. They feel supported and speak positively about the impact of supervision from their managers.



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