

Inspection of Brighton and Hove local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 11 to 15 March 2024

Lead inspector: Máire Atherton, 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	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding

Most children and families in Brighton and Hove receive excellent support and intervention that help to improve their experiences and progress. Since the last inspection in 2018, senior leaders have made significant improvements across all areas of practice and no aspects of practice have deteriorated. Senior leaders responded very effectively to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and to the increasing numbers of families requiring help and support, although waiting times for early help for some families are too long. Leaders use performance data and quality assurance processes to successfully inform learning and development. They have a sound understanding of performance and practice and are clear about the strengths and areas for improvement, including the ongoing need to develop placement sufficiency, resulting in substantial and continuous improvements.

Highly effective and embedded partnership work is modelled by the safeguarding partnership board. This impressive approach is found in the family hubs and at the 'front door for families' and continues to be woven through work with all children and care leavers, exemplified by the relationship-based model of practice and the multi-agency 'partners in change' (PIC) team. The retention of permanent staff is high, enabling consistency of support for children and their families.

What needs to improve?

- The consistency of the gaining and recording of explicit parental consent to checks at the 'front door for families' (FDFF) when appropriate.
- The sufficiency of placements for children with complex needs to avoid reliance on unregistered children's homes.

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

1. Since the last inspection, improvements have been made to the experiences and progress of children who need help and protection. Contacts received by the FDFF are addressed in a timely and proportionate way. Children at risk of harm receive swift and appropriate responses. Partnership work and information-gathering in the FDFF are highly effective. However, the approach to gaining parental consent for information-gathering and sharing is not always clear and consistent. Families' histories of previous involvement are well recorded, but for a few children, recurring patterns, such as neglect, are not always evaluated thoroughly enough to inform next steps. This means that some children wait longer than they should to get the help that they need.
2. Discrete services that come through the FDFF ensure prompt, suitable and effective responses and/or support in the following areas: allegations or concerns about adults working with children; children who need support, care or protection out of hours; children living in private fostering arrangements; and older children aged 16 and 17 who receive intensive help when they are at risk of homelessness.
3. Increasing numbers of children and their families, including young carers, receive innovative, holistic and impactful early help in the recently developed family hubs. Children of all ages are provided with an extensive range of early help, tailored to their specific needs and delivered by professionals from a range of different backgrounds. However, although there is contact and oversight while awaiting allocation, the increase in demand has led to some families waiting for a few weeks for support.
4. Most children benefit from proportionate decision-making about the level of support required that reflects the children's needs and is responsive to the risks that they face.
5. Assessments, including those for unborn children, are comprehensive and capture a wide range of information from partner agencies and the views of children (when possible) and parents. Children's needs and characteristics, including identity, heritage, faith and gender, are fully considered in assessments; assessments include evaluative analysis of concerns, and identification of needs and strengths. These well-formulated assessments result in clearly focused initial child-in-need or child protection plans.

6. Senior managers, through the multi-agency edge-of-care panel, exercise rigorous exploration and oversight of children of all ages, including unborn babies, at risk of entering care. Delivery of intensive 12-week support packages, involving sometimes daily visits by a range of workers, including social work assistants, functional family therapists and adolescent services, lead to rapid improvements to many strained and fractured family relationships. Many older children are able to remain safely with their families as a result, and well-considered planning enables parents to demonstrate whether they are able to care safely for their babies. Social workers use parallel planning well to ensure that alternative arrangements are fully considered and ready, should the primary plan not succeed.
7. Children subject to child-in-need or child protection plans are helped by skilled and knowledgeable social workers. These workers carry out creative and impactful direct work with children to help them to understand difficult experiences and the decisions made about their welfare. Sensitive and thoughtful records are written to children. Most children experience continuous, long-standing and trusting relationships with their social workers, enabling them to make progress and to feel safe at home. Social workers also draw on an extensive range of multidisciplinary support. This includes the impressive PIC team, which offers a flexible and bespoke service to social workers and directly to families, and incorporates practitioners such as from adult services, children's mental health and substance misuse services, and a clinical psychologist. This holistic approach strengthens the positive impact of the work with children and their families.
8. Children's progress and experiences are carefully gauged by professionals in multi-agency child-in-need review meetings and child protection core groups. Child protection officers chair conferences well, carefully exploring the progress made in reducing risks to children and ensuring that children get the support that they need. Step-up and step-down arrangements for children and families moving between statutory interventions and the family hubs are well managed.
9. Decisions to initiate the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline are appropriate and mainly timely, including for children not yet born. Decisions are carefully weighed and balanced. This work successfully diverts many children from needing to enter care, enabling them to remain with their families.
10. For a small number of children, tangible and sustained improvements are not achieved quickly enough, leaving these children in neglectful situations for too long. Senior managers have recognised this; identifying and responding to neglect are practice and partnership priorities.
11. Social workers write well-informed, authoritative statements for care proceedings. These persuasively explain why thresholds of significant harm are met, and the proposed care plan options for children.

12. Many children are successfully protected from potential criminal exploitation and criminality through enterprising, skilled and persistent work in the well-resourced multidisciplinary adolescent service. Members of the strengthened multi-agency vulnerability and risk panel provide rigorous oversight of children at greater risk of exploitation. Most return home interviews with children are completed promptly. Records of return home interviews demonstrate persistent efforts to understand children's experiences when they are missing. For some children, this results in an expedited referral and access to early help services.
13. Work to identify and support children missing education and those being educated at home is undertaken by a well-established and experienced team. Partnership work across the city to identify children at risk of missing education is effective. Staff overseeing children who are electively home educated are alert to safeguarding issues and have good links with social care teams. Resources for overseeing these children have been increased but continue to be outweighed by the growing number of children being educated at home.
14. Children with disabilities and complex needs and their families are supported well. Detailed assessments include the voices of children, resulting in purposeful plans linked to their needs. When risks escalate, timely child protection strategy meetings are held. Children benefit from collaborative partnership work. For some children, this has meant being able to remain at home with appropriate multi-agency support, rather than being admitted to hospital.
15. Management oversight and both individual and group supervision are regular. A focus on understanding and reflecting on children's experiences is prioritised. Caseloads are manageable, allowing social workers the time to build purposeful relationships with children and families.

The experiences and progress of children in care: outstanding

16. Children in care in Brighton and Hove receive excellent care and support. Their social workers know them really well and do the right things to improve their lives. The support children receive is tailored to their individual needs and includes intensive support if they are vulnerable or going through difficult periods. When children come into care, there is thorough and extensive early planning which fully explores the potential for them to live within their extended family; this includes liaison with overseas social work services as necessary. Family group conferences (FGCs) are used routinely to identify support and care options for children. As a result, many live with kinship carers, keeping them connected to their family network.
17. Social workers bring the right people and the right services together to provide support to children and their carers in a coordinated and planned way. This includes input and consultations with the PIC service and the virtual school, as well as the proactive and involved independent reviewing officers. Children benefit from this multidisciplinary approach, which is highly effective in helping

them to make progress in their lives because of the high-quality care and support that they receive.

18. Any difficulties in children's relationships with their carers are rigorously addressed through well-attended placement support meetings and therapeutic interventions, both for children and their carers. This work provides a vital network of support around foster carers, including more regular respite breaks, and enables carers to continue to look after children.
19. Relentless efforts are made to ensure that children live in suitable and caring homes, and children are increasingly able to live nearer to their families. Decision-making for placing a child in an unregistered children's home is tightly controlled. The use of unregistered children's homes is subject to weekly senior leadership team review, and the lead member, the council leader and the chief executive are kept informed. The small number of children in these placements receive regular visits, and sometimes daily contact, as well as extensive multi-agency support, in order to continually assess their safety and care.
20. The work undertaken by social workers with first/birth families, despite the complex and sometimes challenging nature of relationships, enables children in care to rebuild and maintain connections and relationships that bolster their sense of identity and their understanding of their lives and experiences. This work also appropriately and sensitively involves foster and kinship carers so that they develop relationships with other people who are important to the child.
21. Children's plans are comprehensive and clear. They address children's needs and are well written directly to children. Children are encouraged to attend and participate in their reviews, known as Me and My World Reviews. In addition, the people who matter to the children provide the necessary information and so ensure that the right arrangements are put in place to meet children's needs and respond to their wishes. Letters to children after reviews are comprehensive, accessible and warm in tone. They help children to understand their plan and who is helping them.
22. Social workers are child-centred, and their input is appropriately guided by the children they support. Many children in care have stable, long-term relationships with their social workers, sometimes lasting for many years.
23. Social workers visit children in accordance with need. Children living with their brothers and sisters are seen both alone and together. Direct work is a considerable strength. Social workers are highly skilled at enabling children to express their wishes and feelings. Life-story work is sensitively and skilfully undertaken at a time when children are interested and receptive.
24. Children in care are represented at corporate parenting boards and their achievements are celebrated by their corporate parents, including at award

ceremonies attended by council leaders. Children enjoy a diverse range of fun and enriching activities.

25. Children's diverse identities are meaningfully considered and addressed through detailed attention to parental heritage and religious and cultural practice and customs. Identifying whether children have experienced racism or discrimination is an embedded part of social work in Brighton and Hove, and this, coupled with the high frequency of visits and the relationships that children have with workers, means that workers know about children's daily experiences and take action to help and protect them when required. Workers know how important words and language are and use this knowledge in their practice.
26. The health of children in care is promoted effectively. There is impressive attention to children's emotional health and mental well-being. The child-in-care mental health pathway panel helps children to receive timely support when needed.
27. Workers in Brighton and Hove have a high level of awareness and understanding of the needs of neurodiverse children. This helps with the early identification of issues that may impact on their learning and development and enables responses that are tailored to individual needs.
28. The specialist teams that support unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in care provide high-quality, timely and impactful support as soon as children arrive in Brighton and Hove. Staff are attuned to the impact of separation and trauma that these children have experienced and provide them with the care and support that they need.
29. The virtual school has a tangible impact for children in care, particularly in the reduction of part-time timetables and absence. It makes an invaluable contribution to planning and reviewing how best to meet children's needs and support their progress. The majority of children receive excellent support to engage in education, employment or training.
30. The local authority has a sophisticated and nuanced approach to ensuring that children are able to live in permanent arrangements. When children are matched to long-term carers, this is reviewed annually to ensure that the carers remain right for the child. Workers are aware that, for a small number of children, the impact of arrangements being formalised as 'permanent' can be destabilising, and decision-making is based on the individual needs of each child.
31. Permanence through adoption is achieved for significant numbers of children. The adviser to the adoption decision-maker (ADM) checks that all options for family and extended family are fully considered before papers are presented to the ADM to avoid delays in progressing the plan for adoption. The regional adoption agency is Adoption South East.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: outstanding

32. Political and corporate leaders resolutely support and take action to improve the lives of care leavers. They celebrate their achievements and successes, however big or small, at individual and group events.
33. The council has adopted care-leaver status as a protected characteristic. This means that care leavers are afforded the same protection against discrimination as individuals with statutory protected characteristics. This reflects the commitment of the council to them as their corporate parent.
34. A number of care leavers are actively involved in the care leavers' forum and their input is very evident in the decisions made. They co-chair the corporate parenting board and their views are listened to. They have been instrumental in producing the care leavers' offer and a care leaver app.
35. Care leavers benefit from a wide range of services and high-quality support during early adulthood, as the inclusive and comprehensive offer extends beyond their 25th birthday through the 'Here for You' policy.
36. The move from a social worker to a personal adviser (PA) takes place at a relatively late stage. This is in recognition of the well-established and long-standing relationships between children in care and their workers, and the gradual transition of roles and tasks helps to minimise the impact of the change.
37. Most care leavers make really good progress. They benefit from strong support from experienced PAs, who improve their experiences and lives. PAs build trusted relationships with them, and many PAs have been significant adults in their lives for a long time.
38. PAs support care leavers exceptionally well to understand themselves and their identity. Care leavers are encouraged to maintain relationships with family and friends and build external social and emotional networks to support them as adults. PAs are tenacious in building relationships with care leavers' families and friends to support this even further.
39. Care leavers' pathway plans and needs assessments are written with them whenever possible and are comprehensive and detailed. Their plans are easy to understand, and most are reviewed regularly.
40. Care leavers receive the right help and support from their PAs and other agencies to improve their situations and to move successfully into early adulthood. They receive timely help in a crisis and PAs respond quickly to their needs.
41. Care leavers are helped to obtain important documents, such as birth certificates and a range of identification documents. They are encouraged to

access their local authority records with appropriate support and when the time is right for them.

42. Care leavers are supported to achieve in education, employment and training. They are encouraged to be aspirational, to believe in themselves and to think about their future plans. Care leavers receive the equipment they need, stable accommodation, including 'staying put' with their foster carers if required, and the financial security to complete studies or training and to achieve their ambitions.
43. For those not in education, employment or training, PAs provide care leavers with persistent and consistent encouragement and motivation. Care leavers are very well supported by PAs and the Youth Employment Service workers to find the right college course, apprenticeship, training or employment that will enable them to succeed.
44. Workers understand and are working to address the often-complex emotional health barriers to education, employment and training that care leavers are facing. This includes help to be emotionally ready to access education, employment and training opportunities.
45. The majority of care leavers live in a range of suitable accommodation that meets their needs. They are successfully prepared and supported to move into independence when they are ready. Those in unsuitable accommodation are supported into appropriate housing as soon as possible.
46. Care leavers who are at risk are helped by a range of multi-agency support and intervention. PAs are well sighted on risks to care leavers arising from county lines and criminal exploitation and work effectively with other agencies to help care leavers to be safer.
47. PAs keep in regular touch with care leavers who are in custody and help them to plan for their move back into the community and to access housing. PAs provide practical and emotional help and act as a constant source of support for them to rely on.
48. Care leavers who are pregnant or young parents are supported well with their parenting. They benefit from a weekly parenting group, bespoke emotional well-being, and practical and financial support.
49. Care leavers who were or are seeking asylum are supported well in their continuing immigration claims and to settle into their community as young adults. They are supported by the specialist PAs and are visited frequently. PAs have strong relationships with them. Their pathway plans are detailed and up to date and capture their aims and ambitions well.

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

50. Children's services in Brighton and Hove have continued to improve since the last inspection. Leaders in children's services, the council and partners determinedly hold children at the centre of their thinking and actively seek their voices in person through boards and surveys. Funding for current practice is secure and the council members listen when there is a sound business case calling for new or more resources.
51. Partnership working at all levels, led by the safeguarding partnership, and the multidisciplinary practice are real strengths in Brighton and Hove. The judiciary and Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) are very positive about the model of practice, commenting favourably on the enduring relationships that social workers have with children and families. The voluntary organisations, the health community and the police and the youth justice system work closely with social workers and families in the best interests of children. The PIC team exemplifies this and is a highly effective service for children, families and workers throughout children's social care services.
52. Strong and collaborative strategic partnership work results in an impressive array of wraparound multi-agency and multidisciplinary services for children at risk of entering public care. Senior managers are closely sighted and knowledgeable about many of these children through chairing the edge-of-care panel. A lean management hierarchy helps managers to stay close to frontline practice and children's needs.
53. Senior leaders know their services exceptionally well and this is reflected in the self-evaluation. There is a clear line of sight to practice, informed by performance data and audits, both regularly reviewed by the senior leadership team. Audit practice informs learning that is shared widely and effectively with staff. However, gaining feedback from children and families is not yet embedded in the audit process; this misses a valuable learning opportunity. The migration to a new database created challenges in the reporting of children's information but leaders have addressed this.
54. Senior leaders know the areas for development. For example, tackling neglect is a priority for Brighton and Hove and work to address this key challenge is under way. Senior managers have ensured that anti-racist and poverty-aware practice is embedded throughout children's social care.
55. Senior leaders are quick to respond to new government pilot programmes and initiatives that fit well with the relationship-based model of practice. This includes being part of the family network pilot and an additional project to develop networks to support children, which is now part of the established and effective family group conference team.

56. Senior leaders are keenly aware of the challenges around sufficiency of accommodation for children in care and care leavers. The local authority is part of a regional fostering recruitment and retention programme, and the commissioning team strives to find homes that provide for children across a wide range of needs. However, a small number of children currently live in unregistered children's homes.
57. The 'families first' principle is fundamental to ensuring that children enter care only when every avenue has been fully explored within a child's family and wider network. There is continued work to ensure that the best use is made of resources, with full use of in-house foster carers.
58. Social workers consciously choose to work in Brighton and Hove. As a result, there are exceptionally low levels of temporary or short-term staff. Staff are drawn by the strong commitment to anti-discriminatory practice and the relationship-based practice model. They value the highly supportive, child-centred environment in which they practise and feel that the responsibility for children is shared. Management oversight is thorough at all levels and social workers value the individual and group supervision, within each of the small discrete teams.
59. Social workers benefit from regular and relevant training that is provided to equip them with up-to-date knowledge. This enables them to understand risk and impact for children and apply the knowledge effectively in their interactions with children and families.
60. Social workers have manageable, mixed caseloads, reflecting the complexity of needs faced by the children, young people and families they support. This gives them the time that they need to be able to build and sustain relationships with their children and families and so achieve change when it is needed.
61. Social workers know their children very well and talk about them with great affection, warmth and care. One social worker said, 'They have my heart.' They are proud of the children and their progress, and they are ambitious for their futures.
62. The quality of work is strong throughout children's social care services and is making a positive difference to the progress and experiences of children and families in Brighton and Hove.

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