Inspection of Bedford local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 14 to 18 July 2025

Lead inspector: Amanda Maxwell, His Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	**Grade**
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Requires improvement to be 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	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children care leavers	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

The quality of practice and support for children and families in Bedford has declined since the last inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) in November 2021, when they were judged to be good in all areas. Local authority leaders have struggled to fully address significant challenges, particularly around increasing service demand, workforce and management capacity, placement sufficiency and weaknesses in performance. While they have been successful in addressing some of these challenges, in other areas sufficient progress has not been achieved.

Many vulnerable children are receiving effective help, support or care but there are gaps and inconsistencies in services and the quality of practice. Leaders have a broadly accurate self-evaluation of service performance and have taken effective action to address service weaknesses in the 'front door'. In other areas, progress has been slower, or performance has dipped without sufficient focus to remedy this. There has been a lack of urgency in addressing placement sufficiency, leading to a significant proportion of children in care living in unregistered children's homes.

What needs to improve?

- Management oversight and supervision that sufficiently guides social workers and alternatively qualified staff in their work with children and families. (enabler 2, national framework)
- The consistency of response to homeless 16- and 17-year-olds and children who are privately fostered. (outcome 3, national framework)
- The sufficiency and quality of suitable homes to meet children's needs. (outcome 4, national framework)
- Engagement with children's wider family networks. (outcome 2, national framework)
- The consistency in the understanding and response to children at risk of prolonged neglect. (outcome 3, national framework)
- The impact of the Corporate Parenting Board. (enabler 2, national framework)
- The effectiveness of performance management, data and quality assurance activities. (enabler 2, national framework)

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

1. There is an extensive and diverse range of services provided through the Bedford Early Help offer which support families to meet the needs of their children. Early Help assessments and reviews explore worries and concerns with families and address what is needed to improve their family's situations.

2. When needs change, work with families moves appropriately between the various levels of intervention and support. Early help workers provide consistency as they mostly stay involved as part of the wider network of ongoing support.

3. The integrated front door has clear systems which manage and prioritise contacts and referrals while being responsive to children's needs. Managers' oversight provides clear direction to social workers regarding rationale for decisions and required actions that respond swiftly to children in need of urgent protection.

4. Most multi-agency strategy meetings are timely and are used to consider risk and harm effectively. In a minority of meetings, difficulties in coordinating actions with other agencies, particularly the police, lead to delay. This means for a minority of children there is not always a swift enough understanding of risk, which impairs putting in place effective strategies to manage this risk.

5. Appropriate decisions to progress to initial child protection meetings are informed by clear and thorough assessments and analysis. Families are supported to engage in these meetings.

6. Out-of-hours support is effective. Strategy meetings are undertaken promptly with statutory partners and there are appropriate handover arrangements in place with daytime services.

7. The response to a small number of 16- and 17-year-old children presenting as homeless is not always prompt. Some children continue to have poor experiences while their family and accommodation issues are considered. They are not always made aware of their rights and entitlements and are not routinely offered advocacy.

8. Assessments are detailed and comprehensive. All children in the family have their needs and views explored, captured and considered. Analysis of risk, vulnerabilities and strengths provides clarity of what is needed to improve children's lives and support them to make progress.

9. Children's plans are variable in quality. Stronger plans set out clear actions with timescales for actions to be met. Weaker plans lack clarity, which means that actions to improve children's circumstances are not well focused.

10. There is a commissioned family group conference service, which when used helps identify how a child's wider family can support their care. However, the value of such a meeting is not always identified or acted on early enough and when they are identified as being beneficial, families can wait too long for this to take place. Local authority leaders have clear plans in progress to enhance capacity in this area.

11. There is effective management oversight of work with children in the pre-proceedings phase of the Public Law Outline (PLO), and during proceedings. Letters to parents provide clarity of what is needed, and regular reviews occur which monitor progress. Assessments and the consideration of potential alternative carers are progressed in good time, which supports contingency planning.

12. Time is taken to undertake assessments and interventions that are effective to understand and improve parents' capacity to meet their children's needs; as a result, where appropriate children involved in the PLO are stepped down to lower levels of intervention and support and their experiences have improved.

13. Disabled children benefit from appropriate packages of support which enable them to live at home with their families. Children are visited regularly by social workers who spend time getting to know them; records are written sensitively. The quality and impact of child-in-need plans to support disabled children are variable. For some children, these plans do not clearly identify how and what is currently provided and what else is required to meet children's needs by when.

14. When domestic abuse is identified by partners, risk assessment tools are used effectively to provide clarity on vulnerabilities and risk. However, there are delays in some referrals being submitted by partner agencies, such as the

police, which means a minority of children are left in situations of unassessed risk.

15. When children experience neglect, it is identified and responded to. For a small number of children, there is insufficient understanding of the impact of long-term chronic neglect on children. The local children's safeguarding partnership has appropriately recognised that collectively more is needed to improve the response to children at risk of neglect.

16. The identification of young carers and their support needs is inconsistent. Some children's needs remain unassessed and the impact of being a young carer is not fully considered. Individual workers support some young carers. There is an offer of support available but a lack of monitoring of its take-up.

17. There has been a small improvement in the response to children and young people going missing, with some children benefiting from talking and sharing with others the reasons for going missing. There has been an increase in the numbers of children who engage in return home interviews, but this remains too low. The quality of return home interviews remains variable, with the reasons for children going missing not always thoroughly explored. Children who are supported by the specialist multi-agency team benefit from a more collaborative, robust response.

18. The multi-agency child exploitation arrangements provide strategic oversight and a coordinated, strong response to children at risk of exploitation and risk outside the home. Knowledgeable and skilled workers know their children well. Workers' persistence and determination to engage children is effective, and children are making progress and risk is reducing. For children not supported by this team, social workers are not using all available tools and insight to inform their understanding of these vulnerabilities and risks to ensure these inform plans.

19. Arrangements to oversee and safeguard children in private fostering arrangements are disjointed. Children are not seen regularly enough, and assessments of need are insufficiently robust or curious. This is partly mitigated by the support, oversight and engagement of the adult carer provided by the fostering social work service.

20. There is effective oversight and response to allegations about adults who work with children.

21. There are suitable checks and oversight of children who are educated at home. Appropriate action is taken when there are concerns regarding these arrangements. The systems in place to oversee those who have recently been missing from education show thorough exploration of these circumstances. However, the systems to oversee those who have been missing for longer periods of time are not as robust.

The experiences and progress of children in care: requires improvement to be good

22. Most children enter care at the right time, although a few have experienced prolonged periods of neglect before being received into care. Effective arrangements are in place to consider the needs and risks to unborn children, leading to robust and timely plans to provide care for these babies when required.

23. Most children live in homes which meet their needs, and where they are thriving and feel well cared for and safe.

24. Reunification home to family is based on sound decision-making and supported by thorough assessments and plans. These transitions are carefully considered in line with children's wide-ranging needs and wishes. Children in care who live with their parents are both well supported and monitored by the local authority.

25. There are a number of children living in unregistered children's homes due to an insufficiency of suitable homes to meet their needs. This provision is only used when other homes are not available. The local authority seeks to minimise the time children spend in unregistered children's homes by encouraging providers to register and actively pursuing more suitable alternatives. However, current usage indicates significant shortfalls in the authority's placement sufficiency. Although the local authority has a clear and robust policy for the oversight and monitoring of these placements, this policy is not consistently applied. This means that although there is senior management oversight, this is not always clearly recorded on children's records, nor is the impact of this oversight always evident. This leads to a lack of consistency in expectations around the frequency of visiting, with some children not being visited regularly enough. Once these findings were shared with leaders, they took immediate action to strengthen oversight and its recording and review the risk assessments for each of these placements.

26. Some children's plans are detailed, thoughtful and focused, with clear, timebound actions to meet goals. The 'All about Me' reviews are written in kind and caring language, which helps children understand why decisions are made. Reviews are well attended, and independent reviewing officers (IROs) are proactive in building relationships with children and monitoring the progress they make to help them understand their experiences. However, the footprint of the IROs is not routinely evident in children's records.

27. Children have, open and honest relationships with their social workers and workers in the participation team. Children are regularly seen by their social workers. Skilled and engaged social workers know their children well and are forming close and purposeful relationships with them. Some children benefit from being able to share and make sense of their experiences through well-planned, meaningful and imaginative direct work. While some children benefit

from engaging in high-quality life-story work which helps them gain an age-appropriate understanding of their histories, for others this has been delayed.

28. Children are proud of their achievements and social workers and carers ensure that all children's achievements are rewarded and celebrated.

29. Most children are supported to address their day-to-day physical, emotional and specialist healthcare needs. For some children, it takes too long to gain an accurate understanding of their mental health and emotional needs. Some disabled children face delays in accessing specialist paediatric assessments and support when they live at a distance from Bedford.

30. The virtual school is working collaboratively to secure better education outcomes for children. When challenges and barriers are identified, the virtual school works with others to address these and support children back into appropriate education. Children's personal education plans are well used to provide support to children and enable them to achieve their fullest potential.

31. Permanence planning is considered at the earliest opportunity. Most children experience planned moves that are part of their permanence planning. Young children experience early care planning that ensures that they reach their permanent homes quickly. When children are matched to their long-term foster carers, these events are sensitively celebrated.

32. Bedford is part of Adopt East adoption alliance. There is appropriate oversight of this service and children in Bedford are benefiting as a result. Potential adopters are attracted by appealing recruitment campaigns and are then robustly assessed, and well prepared and supported. Children with a plan of adoption are equally well prepared to move and settle into their adoptive homes.

33. Separated migrant children live in suitable culturally matched homes which meet their needs. A minority of children have experienced delays in accessing suitable education due to insufficient provision. For a minority of children, social workers have not routinely considered children's potential vulnerabilities.

34. There have been a number of service improvements which foster carers benefit from. Foster carers, including connected carers, receive effective support which promotes stability and consistency of care for children. The service is on track to meet its current recruitment targets. The oversight of key areas of practice, including foster carer assessments, is not always sufficiently robust.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: requires improvement to be good

35. Personal advisors (PAs) regularly stay in touch and visit their young people as often as is needed. PAs provide consistent practical support and assistance to their young people. This includes helping them to attend important

appointments, seeking medical help, managing their household bills, and maintaining their relationships with those who are important to them. PAs are tenacious and persistent in the support they provide young people in their day-to-day lives.

36. PAs are not consistently allocated within a timescale that helps young people to develop purposeful and close relationships with them before they leave care.

37. PAs continue to offer support and guidance to young people after they turn 21 if that is consistent with their wishes and needs. Many young people have remained in touch with their PAs even when they no longer receive a service.

38. PAs support high numbers of young people. This impacts their ability to complete all the required tasks, including ensuring young people's records are up to date. Leaders recognise that more is needed to address this.

39. Care-experienced young people are involved in shaping and contributing to their pathway plans. The plans detail their needs and how these needs will be met as well as providing helpful information and contact numbers. However, some pathway plans are not up to date and do not reflect current circumstances.

40. Care-experienced young people are involved in participation activities which influence wider service development. Some are actively engaged in the corporate parenting board and feel their voice and views are valued by the board. They have also co-produced 'How to guides' for social workers and PAs providing tips about how to support children and young people. A group of care-experienced parents have been enabled to set up a support group to offer an opportunity to share their experiences and make friends while building support networks.

41. PAs support young people to address their physical and emotional health needs. They support them to attend appointments and provide caring challenge to young people to help them explore how healthcare, including support for their mental health, can improve their quality of life.

42. The local offer is available online. The offer has recently been updated to increase the amount of setting up home grant, extend council tax exemption and enhance specific support for those in higher education. Other aspects of the offer, such as support to access Wi-Fi at home, are not explicit or sufficiently specific.

43. Care-experienced young people have the important documents that they need, such as passports and identity documents. Some young people receive support to explore and gain access to their records, but this support is not consistently offered to all young people who might benefit from it.

44. Former separated migrant young people are well supported by PAs, who assist them in settling into life in the UK. They support them to locate family with whom they have lost touch if safe to do so.

45. Vulnerable care-experienced young people, including those who are parents, are well supported by PAs who know them well and understand their needs. PAs understand the importance of establishing positive relationships with young people in custody. PAs are in regular touch with them and visit them frequently. PAs work robustly with partner agencies, planning and preparing young people who are soon to be released from custody.

46. Most care-experienced young people live in suitable, stable homes which meet their needs. Care-experienced young people described being well supported in their search for a home.

47. PAs support care-experienced young people to engage in education, employment or training which they are interested in. PAs celebrate young people's successes and encourage them to build on their volunteering experiences, preparing them for employment. When young people need support to re-engage in education, employment or training they are offered helpful advice and guidance, although support from the virtual school does not extend beyond 18. The potential for the council and partner agencies to provide employment and training opportunities for care-experienced young people has not been fully explored or developed.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: requires improvement to be good

48. The local authority self-evaluation and service reviews have provided clarity and understanding to senior leaders about strengths and areas to improve. Leaders are focused on areas of practice deemed to be in most need of improving. This shows appropriate prioritisation but means that other areas requiring swift improvement have not been adequately addressed and consequently not all children are receiving effective support and intervention. This includes some areas highlighted by previous inspections (ILACS and joint targeted area inspection (JTAI)), such as privately fostered children, return home interviews and partnership engagement in corporate parenting and safeguarding, where sufficient improvement has not been achieved or sustained.

49. Partner engagement in Bedford is variable. There are positive relationships with the judiciary and the Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) which have impacted the quality of work and intervention for children within the PLO and proceedings. However, elsewhere, despite efforts by the local authority to galvanise statutory partners, there is a lack of urgency and impact in work to address key issues with health and police.

50. There is senior leadership aspiration to achieve the best for children in Bedford. However, more is needed to ensure the whole council is focused on children

and works collectively to embrace and act on its corporate parenting responsibilities. The corporate parenting panel has been remodelled; this is starting to embed but the panel is not currently having enough impact in holding members, services and partners to account and so drive progress for children. Children are involved with the panel, 'change makers' group and other forums. They influence developments and key decisions; appropriately, senior leaders have identified the need to strengthen this engagement and increase its influence on service development.

51. In a challenging financial climate for the local authority, investment has been provided to add capacity in areas which have experienced substantial increases in demand. This, however, has not been enough to ensure that sufficient management and workforce capacity is in place in all areas to support consistently good practice.

52. There are wider council workforce challenges with vacancies and turnover in key areas of service provision. Senior leaders have employed a variety of strategies which focus on the recruitment and retention of staff. There have been some minor improvements of late, with an increase in the numbers of permanent staff in the service. However further work is needed to bring this to a level which enables the effective delivery of good social work practice.

53. Senior leaders identify that there is more to do to improve and strengthen their performance data and quality assurance activities. Activities are not yet providing a clear, reliable source of information to inform senior leaders about the quality of practice to improve children's experiences. There are inconsistencies in the quality and collation of both quantitative and qualitative data to inform senior leaders about the quality of practice and intervention. Currently, there is limited moderation activity of audits and so there is inconsistency in the understanding of what good practice looks like. Learning from audits is not always leading to improvements in practice due to lack of follow-through or challenges in addressing the root causes of weaker practice.

54. Staff are positive about the support and opportunities they have while working in Bedford. They have access to a wide variety of informative development and learning opportunities. Those in their assessed and supported year in employment (ASYE) are well supported by the social work academy, and this positively impacts their practice. The service has amended its chosen approach to working with children and families, but this is not fully understood and applied by all workers and managers.

55. Supervision and management oversight is not consistently driving children's plans to ensure all children's circumstances improve as quickly as they need. Social workers' and PAs' caseloads are too high, and this impacts their ability to complete all the required tasks needed to provide quality support to children and young people.

56. The local authority has concrete plans to develop and improve the sufficiency of homes to meet the needs of children and care-experienced young people in Bedford. These are appropriate plans, but progress has been too slow and other areas which could contribute to sufficiency, such as strengthening commissioning and enhancing support for family networks, are underdeveloped. There is a lack of homes to meet children's specific needs, which means vulnerable children live in unregistered children's homes. The sufficiency plan includes creating additional in-house children's home provision in the area. This is alongside a focus and plan to increase the numbers and provision of fostering households and increase the support available to these foster carers.

57. The participation offer for children and young people is a strength in Bedford. It offers activities to a wide variety of children with different circumstances and needs. Children and young people are engaged and contribute to key developments and wider national thinking. Young people have been involved in creating a variety of resources to support others, and they have high aspirations for what they wish to do in the future.

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