

Inspection of Bracknell Forest local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 8 to 12 December 2025

Lead inspector: Naintara Khosla, 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	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of children in care	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of children care leavers	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding

Since the last inspection in 2022, Bracknell Forest has sustained and strengthened exceptional services for children and families. Leaders demonstrate unwavering dedication to children's services and channel significant support to ensure that children receive consistent, responsive and transformative intervention. Multi-agency professionals work collaboratively and act proactively, creating opportunities for change and promoting positive childhood experiences. Political and corporate leaders prioritise investment into Bracknell Forest's children and families, and they respond swiftly to surges in demand.

Leaders listen to children and young people, celebrate their success and act on their views, so that policy and practice evolve to meet their needs. Leaders and practitioners have embedded a culture and ethos that is committed to the relentless pursuit of bettering vulnerable children's lives. A wide range of creative early help services support families effectively to reduce risk and promote resilience. Children enjoy strong, trusting relationships with practitioners, who engage early to prevent escalation into statutory services.

A highly effective performance management framework provides clear oversight of the quality of practice and promotes continuous improvement, ensuring that children's needs are understood and met exceptionally well. Leaders respond swiftly to demographic changes, equipping the workforce with cultural awareness training and anti-racist practice forums to address disproportionality and meet diverse family needs.

What needs to improve?

- Communication to a diverse range of communities and religious forums about the role of the local authority designated officer (LADO). (outcome 3, national framework)

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

1. Children, families and care leavers benefit from a wide range of creative, therapeutic services that meet families' identified needs at universal or targeted levels of early help support. Early help practitioners are skilled and respond appropriately so that children's needs are met within statutory services when risks escalate. A range of professionals complete early help assessments, which identify and respond to children's needs. When young carers' responsibilities emerge, they gain access to a range of social activities and therapeutic support, giving them time away from their caring responsibilities.
2. The multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) delivers a prompt, thorough response and receives good-quality, multi-agency referral information. Managers provide timely, consistent oversight and issue time-bound guidance supporting social workers' understanding of next steps. Confident, proficient managers understand risk exceptionally well. They are responsive to children's experiences and prioritise safety planning, ensuring that children are seen quickly.
3. Children's ethnicity and that of family ethnicity are sought at the earliest opportunity to understand families' cultural needs well. This cultural and religious insight enables professionals to respond more effectively to families' needs.
4. Across MASH and early help, the embedded relational model of practice engages families, so that parents and professionals collaborate to meet children's needs. Social workers provide information about their role and remit, enabling parents to give informed consent. Parents value and appreciate the life changes they have achieved with professional guidance and support.
5. Effective safeguards are in place to support children outside normal working hours. The emergency duty service works seamlessly with day services to maintain continuity for children and families.

6. Child protection strategy meetings are convened swiftly with good multi-agency attendance and effective information-sharing. This informs safety plans that mitigate risks to children. Strategy discussions address risks for children who go missing or who are being exploited, and practitioners share intelligence on associations, places and spaces.
7. Practitioners from the 'MAKESAFE' team seek to maximise children's inclusion and enjoyment at school and through social activities to create a protective, stable environment and disrupt grooming activities. This support is a strength, helping to manage and significantly reduce risks for many children.
8. Comprehensive assessments of children's needs are timely, detailed and include consideration of children's unique characteristics, including their culture, ethnicity, religion and any disabilities. Children's needs are met at the right threshold of need and children access statutory services only when necessary. When children's needs can be met by early help services, they are stepped down from social workers.
9. Social workers are fierce advocates for their children and understand their disabilities and complex needs. They are tenacious in building relationships and communicate effectively, using a range of techniques and tools to elicit children's wishes and feelings. Social workers are committed to understanding the lived experiences of children and respond to help them have improved home conditions and better childhood experiences. Family network meetings and family group conferencing form a core component of the social work toolkit. Social workers convene these meetings to engage families in creating practical plans that strengthen support networks and reduce parenting pressures. This collaborative approach empowers families to identify solutions, share responsibility and sustain positive change.
10. Social workers focus on disabled children's lived experiences and take time to understand their specific needs. They identify neglect early, use practical toolkits to help parents improve home conditions and act decisively when risks escalate. As a result, children are safer. Children benefit from excellent holistic support that meets identified occupational therapy and speech and language needs. Core group meetings assist professionals to collaborate, discuss risks and produce purposeful plans that, as well as promoting their safety, address wider health and social needs.
11. Children experiencing neglect or domestic abuse receive exceptional services. Expert, in-house, multi-agency professionals mobilise specialist help, responding to issues such as substance use, mental health and domestic abuse. They work closely with parents, offering step-by-step help to improve home conditions and strengthen parenting capacity.
12. When families experience domestic abuse, professionals deliver comprehensive services for both victims and perpetrators, ensuring that adults receive support to

reduce harm and promote safety. Practitioners recognise children as victims in their own right and provide bespoke therapeutic help through specialist counsellors. Multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARAC) shape child protection plans and core group meetings, enabling professionals to analyse risks thoroughly and take timely, coordinated action that reduces risks to children.

13. When children enter the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline, managers are conscientious and focus on the lived experience of children. When risks escalate, decisive action is taken to reduce children's exposure to harm.
14. When allegations are made against people who work with children, the LADO ensures that actions are followed through to safeguard children. However, additional targeted communication is necessary to ensure that all religious and cultural communities understand the role and remit of the LADO.
15. Children aged 16 and 17 who are at risk of homelessness receive help to repair family relationships, access legal advice or enter care when this is assessed to be in their best interests.
16. The quality of assessments for children in private fostering arrangements is variable. Leaders recognise the need to strengthen this area so that children's permanency needs are considered effectively.
17. Children who are home educated or at risk of missing education are meticulously monitored with detailed and proactive oversight by the strong virtual school. Excellent partnership working between the local authority and schools ensures that vulnerable children receive help when they need it.

The experiences and progress of children in care: outstanding

18. Children in care receive outstanding help and support. Decisions for children to enter care are appropriate and timely. The children are well informed by high-quality assessments, which then support placement planning meetings and care plans. Children live in homes that provide consistent, nurturing care that promotes social opportunities and enables children to make very good educational progress. Professionals explore family networks consistently and carefully, enabling children to remain with their extended families when it is in their interests to do so. Children and carers access a comprehensive therapeutic model rooted in relationship-based practice, which builds secure attachments and strengthens relationships.
19. Practitioners consider each child's individual characteristics, including those of disabled children, before entry into care, to promote and foster strong attachments, provide stability, offer reassurance and certainty. This is a real strength. For the small number of children who are living in cross-cultural homes, carers work to provide stability and a sense of belonging, while thoughtfully considering how best to reflect children's cultural identity.

20. Permanence is timely and is overseen by knowledgeable managers and highly productive panels. Permanence planning meetings secure timely decision-making, enabling children to thrive. Social workers consider all permanence options for children, and contingency planning is in place so that children are offered the best permanence option.
21. Social workers speak with care and pride about separated children they support. They help children to settle and obtain immigration status, provide access to education and connect them to family whenever possible. They understand what matters to all children in care, including their interests, identity, cultural heritage and specialist support needs. Children participate in a wide range of hobbies and interests, and their successes are celebrated. Professionals prioritise children's physical and mental health, arrange specialist healthcare for disabled children and promote wellbeing.
22. When children are at risk of exploitation, professionals mobilise quickly to provide protective support through mentoring relationships, social activities, tuition and increased visits from social workers and Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) so that children feel connected and able to talk about what is happening. Return home conversations take place, and information is shared within the child's networks to understand their circumstances and prevent escalation of risks. Tenacious networking reduces episodes of going missing from care, reintegrates vulnerable children into school, and connects them with protective, trusted adults who promote stability and belonging.
23. Social workers regularly visit children, including disabled children and those living in homes at a distance. Social workers use direct work tools that are engaging, including technology, a dolls house, communication books and prompt cards. When children are traumatised and isolated, social workers are steadfast when building relationships and maintain relentless visiting to provide children with a trusted adult.
24. Family time arrangements are considered with children, and their views are sought rigorously before decisions are made. Children are helped to understand complex family circumstances and positive relationships are harnessed and promoted. Social workers take action to ensure that children are protected from contentious situations and intervene to protect them when necessary.
25. Social workers complete comprehensive risk assessments and implement contingency plans, and they ensure that children return home only when risks diminish and protective measures are firmly in place. IROs evaluate reunification plans and consider changes to children's home circumstances thoroughly. Social workers plan for graduated increases in family time, help to strengthen relationships and access specialist resources to promote children successfully living at home.

26. All children's voices, life experiences and decisions about their care are captured on their records, so that children's histories are available for them now and in the future if they want to understand more about their childhood. IROs form strong, consistent relationships with children. They advocate effectively on behalf of children to prevent drift. They conduct review meetings with children and communicate decisions through well-crafted, sensitive letters.
27. A life journey worker collaborates with children, therapists and social workers to understand children's stories, their trauma and childhoods to craft exemplary life-story work.
28. At the time of this inspection, no children were living in unregistered children's homes. Children are rarely placed in unregistered children's homes. However, should this happen, leaders have strong oversight and monitoring of children, including increased social work visits and oversight by IROs. The commissioning team helps providers to become registered with Ofsted to avoid the use of unregistered provision.
29. The fostering service is child focused, with supervising social workers who build strong relationships with the fostering household. Carers are visited regularly and at times that are flexible to suit both carers and children. Foster carers are supported well. They have access to training, and a practice model that creates secure, extended foster family support from the fostering community.
30. Children in care benefit from improving educational outcomes that exceed national and regional benchmarks. Children's personal education plans set out ambitious targets that include a focus on children's holistic developmental needs, for example speech and language. Children in care progress exceptionally well and the virtual school provides mentoring, careers guidance and one-to-one intervention.
31. Bracknell Forest works closely with the Regional Adoption Agency (Adopt Thames Valley). The adoption service provided by Bracknell Forest is a beacon of exemplary practice, with strong assessments of adopters, who are supported and prepared on their adoption journey. Detailed, impressive child placement records help adopters prepare and respond to the children they care for. Adoptive carers and children have pathways to facilitate early permanence, and children's attachment needs are met effectively.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: outstanding

32. Care leavers receive outstanding support from dedicated personal advisers (PAs), who build meaningful, nurturing relationships, and champion their aspirations. Care leavers' needs are met exceptionally well with loyal, committed PAs, who champion their ambitions. Care leavers in Bracknell receive well-planned, early support that prioritises their individual needs and fosters trust. Skilled PAs undertake frequent, purposeful visits to provide practical assistance, ensuring

that care leavers feel valued, connected to the wider care-leaving community and have support to progress confidently towards independence. PAs are fierce advocates for their care leavers, ensuring that they have a good understanding of their rights and entitlements. PAs help young adults to access health and dental appointments and obtain health information. This strengthens care leavers' wellbeing and helps to progress their independence skills.

33. Care leavers have access to therapy and early help provision. This helps young people to navigate their transition into adulthood and become increasingly resilient. A range of social events are on offer, including sports, creative art activities and 'Meet and Eat'. These promote emotional and social connection to the care-leaving service. Leaders take pride in celebrating care leavers' successes, and these occasions help leaders to hear from, and understand what is important for, care leavers.
34. Leaders have co-produced with care leavers the significantly improved local offer that is well understood and accessible. For example, care leavers can now access free gym sessions, council tax exemption and birthday payments up to age 25. Financial support not only covers the cost of identity documents but also reassures young people that their identity matters and they are valued as individuals. PAs play a vital role in supporting care leavers, working proactively to prevent evictions, reduce debt and develop budgeting skills.
35. Care leavers who are parents and their children benefit from tailored parenting support from an 'under 1s' worker. The specialist advice and support promote positive parenting strategies and access to early years support. This means care leavers' children have excellent opportunities to get 'the best start in life' and leaders recognise the opportunities to address disproportionality.
36. When concerns about exploitation arise, enhanced multi-agency support mobilises to reduce risks, providing reassurance and help to young people. PAs work collaboratively with other professionals, working effectively to mitigate risks and recognise care leavers' vulnerabilities.
37. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers are supported to integrate in the local communities through access to education, training and employment opportunities. Cultural and religious needs are considered, and PAs attend health appointments, immigration interviews and court hearings alongside the young adults, providing emotional, practical and financial support.
38. Care leavers receive ongoing support beyond the age of 21. Regular communication through letters and texts about activities and events keeps the door open for care leavers who may have left the service to re-engage with support if they wish to.
39. Care leavers in custody receive regular visits, mental health support and proactive planning for accommodation. Practitioners work closely with care leavers to

prepare for release, ensuring they have stable housing and tailored guidance. Reintegration into the community is strengthened through employment opportunities and practical and emotional support, enabling care leavers to build positive futures.

40. More care leavers are getting chances to study, work and train, and these opportunities keep improving. A growing number of partnerships between Bracknell Forest council, local businesses and national companies provide work experience, apprenticeships and employability programmes to care leavers. This is leading to permanent employment and improving work prospects.
41. Pathway plans are co-written and set out young people's rights and entitlements, motivating young people to pursue their ambitions with confidence. Care leavers live in safe and comfortable housing. The staged and flexible approach to achieving independence means that care leavers have time to learn and develop their life skills. Priority housing is awarded once care leavers are ready to live alone and have the skills to do so. Care leavers are supported to remain with their foster carers when this is what carers and young people want.
42. Care leavers with mental health needs receive strong, timely help that enables them to make meaningful progress. PAs are highly attuned to emerging difficulties and act swiftly to secure effective support, ensuring that vulnerable young people feel understood and cared for. When extra support is needed, care leavers can access specialist services, such as an adult mental health worker and early help, offering emotional wellbeing support.

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

43. Since the last inspection, leaders, managers and practitioners have not only sustained outstanding services but have raised the bar even higher. They have strengthened practice across all areas and delivered exceptional progress, particularly for children in care and care leavers. This relentless focus on excellence ensures that vulnerable children experience stability, security and opportunities to thrive. Leaders are responsive to demographic changes, equipping the workforce with cultural awareness training and anti-racist practice forums to address disproportionality, better understand poverty and meet each family's diverse needs.
44. Corporate and political leadership in Bracknell Forest is exemplary. It recognises the demand pressures in children's services and responds swiftly with requisite investment to ensure workforce stability, so that vulnerable children do not suffer detriment.
45. Early help is a key strategic pillar in providing a wraparound support to families at all stages of need, whether universal, targeted or for care leavers. Family hubs have an extensive offer to support families' parenting so that statutory

intervention is prevented where possible. Creative initiatives, such as the 'Dogs for Good' programme, help vulnerable children build connections within their communities. These approaches foster belonging and strengthen friendship networks through safe, inclusive social activities. The adopted model of social work practice operates consistently and effectively in Bracknell Forest and embraces a relational approach, with explicit commitment to understanding the culture and diverse needs of families. Relationships are harnessed, protected and cultivated so that families' experiences and perspectives are understood very well. The efficacy of this relational social work is evident in all areas of practice with children and young people.

46. Leaders demonstrate a deep understanding of the social work task. They equip practitioners with motivational interviewing techniques, direct work tools and resources that enable families and children to explore their experiences, realise their potential and make meaningful changes that improve children's lives. Families are positive about their experiences with social workers, and their feedback, obtained in a variety of forums, confirms the positive impact that practitioners have so that families understand patterns of abuse and gain insight into family dynamics.
47. Among many examples of effective social work practice, a notable strength is the leadership-led work with families to overcome domestic abuse. Leaders have embedded a whole-system approach that impacts positively for victims and perpetrators and recognises children as victims in their own right.
48. The chief executive values the expertise and knowledge of the children's social care leadership team. This secures a council-wide corporate parenting approach, ensuring that care leavers and the children in care council 'Say it Loud, Say it Proud' and are integral to decision-making. Their views are not only sought for new policy initiatives, but they set the agenda. The council are ambitious for care leavers and consistently seek opportunities to go above and beyond. Leaders designate care leavers as a protected characteristic. This is driving improved access to priority housing and tackling inequality in employment, by actively promoting work experience and apprenticeship opportunities for vulnerable children and young adults. Care leavers benefit from continued IRO review, oversight and advocacy beyond 18 years, adding a vital layer of relationship and advocacy as they progress into adulthood.
49. Leaders demonstrate exceptional foresight and strategic skill in securing a broad range of homes for children. They actively collaborate with commissioning partners to provide nurturing environments tailored to each child's individual needs. Through this strong leadership, placement sufficiency is achieved, ensuring that children experience continuity and security in registered homes.
50. Leaders work to continuously strengthen mature and cohesive partnerships with police, schools, Cafcass, the family courts and the integrated care board. Partners utilise opportunities through the multi-agency safeguarding arrangements to

share audit practice and learning. MARAC is one example of the significantly impactful safety planning work of the partnership.

51. Leaders have a comprehensive, highly effective performance management and quality assurance framework that accurately provides a line of sight into children's services. Leaders have an extensive self-assessment, rightly highlighting a track record of achievement and setting out future ambitions.
52. Leaders have established a highly effective social work academy that provides tailored support to practitioners at every stage of their career, securing Bracknell Forest's positive as 'employer of choice'. Practitioners are effusive about working in Bracknell. They appreciate the strong child-focused ethos, relational practice model, manageable workloads and high-quality training and supervision. They value leaders' visibility, approachability and unwavering commitment to children, which underpins their decision to remain working in Bracknell Forest.

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