

# Bournemouth

## Inspection of children's social care services

**Inspection dates: 16 July 2018 to 27 July 2018**

**Lead inspector: Nicola Bennett**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

<b>Judgement</b>	<b>Grade</b>
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Inadequate
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Requires improvement
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Requires improvement
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement

Services for children in Bournemouth need to improve. Senior leaders have not made progress with a number of recommendations from the previous inspection and practice deficits remain in key areas. Leaders have not paid sufficient attention to address areas of practice where performance is poor or has declined, such as the experiences and progress of care leavers. Although action has been taken to improve capacity and oversight of practice in some teams, it has not led to consistent and timely improvements in service provision.

When children in Bournemouth are identified as in need of help and protection, they are safeguarded well. Effective work is undertaken with them to reduce risk and address their needs. When children's circumstances do not improve, timely action is taken by social workers to safeguard their welfare. However, too many children with less acute needs who may require help and support experience delays in receiving a response from children's services. This means that children wait for assessments and interventions and do not receive timely support to meet their needs.

Decision-making in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) is not consistently timely, the quality of strategy discussions is too variable and subsequent child protection enquiries are not recorded well. The majority of assessments undertaken by the assessment team are of poor quality. Notably, work within the safeguarding team is of a better standard throughout, and once their cases reach this team, children receive timely and effective help from experienced social workers to improve their circumstances.

Prior to leaving care, most children receive a good service from their social workers, who know them well. The majority make good progress and live in good-quality foster homes with carers who are supportive and meet their needs. Services for care leavers have deteriorated since the last inspection and too many young people are not supported effectively in order to ensure that they achieve good outcomes or are ready for adulthood.

## **What needs to improve**

- The effectiveness and oversight of leaders to drive forward service improvements.
- Management oversight and review of social work practice, including supervision.
- The quality of performance information available to senior managers and regular review of actions arising from auditing activity.
- The quality of assessments, plans and service provision for care leavers.
- The quality and timeliness of responses to contact and referrals, including strategy discussions and child protection enquiries.
- The application of thresholds in relation to referrals and decision-making following the completion of assessments.
- The quality of response to homeless 16- and 17-year-olds and children on the edge of care.
- The educational progress and achievement of children in care and the effectiveness of the oversight and challenge to schools for children on part-time time-tables.
- The quality of responses to children at risk of sexual exploitation or to children who go missing.

## **The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection requires improvement**

1. Children and families benefit from a wide range of evidence-based early help services. Staff work creatively to engage families in developing parenting capacity and building resilience. In cases considered by inspectors, these programmes that provide multi-agency support make a difference to families and improve children's lives. However, children and families accessing early help too often experience delays in the assessment of their needs. The quality of assessments is variable and plans often lack specific and measurable actions. Review meetings are not consistently held on a regular basis and some children experience delays in being provided with help to address identified need. The current systems for collecting performance information are not sufficiently robust to provide an accurate picture of the difference that early help services is making for children and their families.
2. Too often, children and young people in Bournemouth do not receive timely support to meet their needs. Delays in decision-making within the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) mean that children live in circumstances of unassessed need for too long before receiving help. When children's circumstances change, partners make appropriate referrals to the MASH. However, the quality and detail of information that is provided by partners is variable. Additionally, there is an absence of partners in quality assuring referral information, particularly the police and probation, prior to referring concerns. As a result, there are often delays in decision-making while further information is gathered.
3. Social workers and managers do not always make appropriate decisions about the level of intervention required to help children. This is because each concern raised about a child in the MASH is often considered in isolation. As a result, numerous contacts and referrals can often be made by partner agencies before the local authority responds, leading to missed opportunities to intervene at the earliest opportunity for children.
4. Initial child protection conferences and subsequent reviews are timely. Social workers in the safeguarding team know their children well and visit them within timescales that reflect their needs. They engage well with families and professionals to effectively evaluate, assess and inform planning in order to improve children's circumstances. The vast majority of child protection and child in need plans are of good quality, enabling children and families to understand what is expected of them and what needs to change by when, although contingency plans are not always explicit. Regular multi-agency child in need meetings and core groups effectively review progress in achieving children's outcomes. However, in a minority of cases seen by inspectors, children were stepped down to early help services before sustained change was evidenced, resulting in some families subsequently being re-referred for a social care service.

5. Where the circumstances of children subject to child protection planning do not improve, social workers take timely action. There is effective use of the public law outline (PLO). Legal planning meetings demonstrate appropriate consideration of risks and use of legal advice to clarify actions. Social workers ensure that families understand the nature of risk and what needs to change in order to reduce concerns about their children. This is underpinned by letters to families that clearly set out issues and expectations for change.
6. The quality of help and protection provided by the disabled children's team is a strength. Thoughtful, early planning ensures that children receive coordinated and bespoke services to ensure a smooth transition to adulthood. Creative work is undertaken to build confidence and resilience, to promote independence and to enable young people to achieve their ambitions. Risks are identified and responded to in a timely way and robust assessments result in clear plans to meet children's needs.
7. The out-of-hours emergency duty team has recently been restructured and this is leading to improvements in the timeliness of response for children. However, the service is still not sufficiently robust and while children are seen to ascertain their welfare, the quality and thoroughness of interventions are variable.
8. Where children are considered to be at risk of significant harm, they receive an effective service. Most strategy discussions are timely and have appropriate multi-agency attendance. However, the rationale for decision-making is not always well recorded. Although resulting actions and plans protect and support children, they are often insufficiently specific or time bound. Similarly, it is not clear from the records that children have been seen and spoken to in order for workers to elicit their wishes and feelings.
9. The vast majority of assessments undertaken in the assessment team of children who may be in need of help and protection are of poor quality. Assessments are not consistently carried out within timescales that reflect children's situations or are not updated when children's circumstances change. Too many assessments seen by inspectors lack depth, are over-optimistic, and historic information is too poorly considered to provide a clear analysis of risk or to inform planning. Social workers do not always demonstrate professional curiosity, and children are not always seen in a timely way or seen alone as part of the assessment process. Identified risks are not routinely explored with children to understand their daily lived experiences. As a result, too many children who meet the threshold for a social work service are stepped down to early help services, leading to delays in receiving appropriate and timely interventions in order to address their needs and prevent risks escalating.
10. The local authority has not made sufficient progress since the last inspection to develop an edge of care service for adolescents. This is resulting in unplanned entry to care for a small number of young people. Conversely, 16- and 17-year-olds presenting as homeless do not receive a rigorous enough assessment of

their needs by the assessment team to inform whether they would benefit from being accommodated by the local authority. This means that these vulnerable young people do not receive an appropriate level of support to meet their emotional and practical needs, leaving them in situations where they are at risk of experiencing harm.

11. Children who are privately fostered receive timely visits and a thorough assessment of need. A large number of children who are privately fostered in Bournemouth attend language schools, and the private fostering team has established effective working relationships with language school leaders to ensure that timely notifications are received, and that children are appropriately assessed and supported. Where children are living in circumstances where their needs are not being met, social workers take appropriate action.
12. Children and young people who are considered to be at risk of sexual exploitation receive a timely and effective initial response from the child sexual exploitation co-ordinator. However, when sexual exploitation is the presenting issue, broader safeguarding concerns such as neglect are not consistently considered when children first come to the attention of the local authority or in subsequent assessments and planning. This impacts on the effectiveness of interventions as underlying issues and the needs of children remain unidentified. When children and young people go missing, return home interviews undertaken are generally detailed, reflect the views of the child and contain an analysis of risk. However, where children are seen within 72 hours there are often significant delays in completion of the record of the return home interview and, therefore, these interviews do not consistently inform planning in order to identify escalating or reduced risk to the child.
13. There are good systems in place to monitor and track children who are electively home educated and children missing from education. The local authority produces clear guidance, advice and support to parents to assist them in providing out-of-school education.
14. Oversight and co-ordination of allegations of abuse against adults are not sufficiently rigorous. Thresholds are not consistently applied, recording is not comprehensive, and decisions are not always accompanied by a clear rationale. Senior leaders have taken immediate action to address the shortfalls identified in this service during the course of the inspection.

## **The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers requires improvement**

15. Social workers engage effectively with agency professionals and families to support children to remain with their families where it is safe for them to do so. Where this is not possible, timely decisions are taken for children to come into care. Thresholds for care proceedings are well understood and appropriately applied. Social work assessments and statements for court proceedings and care plans are thorough. Children's contact with family members is thoughtfully considered and meets their needs.
16. Children benefit from early and well-considered planning for permanence. Permanence planning meetings track progress to ensure that children are living in appropriate, stable placements with their brothers and sisters that meet their needs and improve their outcomes. Foster carers are ambitious for the children in their care and are supported effectively to meet their needs. The development of the 'resilience' foster care service has enabled an increasing number of children who have experienced a number of placement breakdowns to successfully return from residential to stable, family-based care that better suits their needs.
17. The establishment of the regional adoption agency Aspire Adoption, managed by Bournemouth on behalf of three local authorities, has led to improvements in adoption performance, the quality of assessments and level of support to adoptive carers. When a decision has been made that adoption is the right plan for a child, there is early and effective liaison between the social workers and the adoption agency. Children benefit from timely matching with adopters. However, there is an insufficient number of fostering for adoption placements, which necessitates a change of placement for some children. The local authority has reduced the time that children wait to be placed with adopters from the granting of a placement order. However, a small number of children continue to experience delays until they move to live with their permanent family.
18. Children are well matched with adopters who are able to access a range of therapeutic and support services to maximise their understanding of and care for children. Children's views and experiences are captured effectively, and direct and therapeutic input helps prepare them for adoption. Support plans are suitably considered and ensure that adopters have access to necessary practical and financial support to ensure a successful adoption as far as possible. An experienced adoption panel chair and an agency decision-maker provide appropriate scrutiny and challenge to adoption applications.
19. Social workers have well-established, positive relationships with children in care and know them well. Children in care are visited regularly and the strengths and the aspirations of children are captured well to inform planning. Where children can return home, there is good engagement of family members and appropriate plans in place to successfully achieve this. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking

children are sensitively supported, and staff work tenaciously to maximise opportunities for education and employment and to assist young people to work towards independence.

20. Creative direct and life-story work is undertaken with children in care to help them make sense of their lives and build emotional resilience. Social workers draw on a range of multi-agency and in-house services in order to enhance their practice. Children and foster carers have access to a good range of therapeutic and specialist services, which strengthen the quality and stability of placements. Placement disruptions are minimised through effective reviews and timely interventions.
21. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) provide effective oversight of children's plans, providing challenge and escalating issues where necessary, to ensure that these are progressed in a timely way and that outcomes are achieved. IROs regularly visit children between reviews of their care plan and ensure that children's views and experiences are listened to and acted on. Social work reports are thorough and clearly articulate children's views. The majority of care plans are up to date, and children's cultural and identity, health and education needs are well considered. Children increasingly have access to advocacy services. However, actions identified by advocates are not always followed through by social workers, thus reducing their impact and effectiveness.
22. Children in care and care leavers are effectively supported to participate in a variety of social activities and groups, including a theatre production about the experiences of children in care that is being delivered across the wider partnership. The local authority holds a number of celebration events and activities for children in care. Children in care and care leavers are active members of the corporate parenting panel and are supported effectively to influence the planning and development of services, for example the development of the pledge, the recruitment of all children's social care staff and the delivery of training.
23. The virtual school team is enthusiastic and committed to providing children in care with support at school, and it is valued by schools. Many of the children it supports have special educational needs or mental health needs, including anxiety and attachment issues. Virtual school staff help to ensure that pastoral care for these children is good. They also provide a good link between the child, carers and the school, with positive outcomes for children as a result. However, while personal education plans (PEPs) for children are often used well to provide additional pastoral support and opportunities, they are less effective in helping these children to achieve as well as other pupils. This is because the quality of plans is variable and weaker plans do not sufficiently focus on learning and in-class techniques in order to aid learning. This limits their effectiveness in ensuring that children make good progress in their lessons. As a result, not all children in care make good progress and reach their potential by the time they



leave secondary school, and they achieve less well than children in care in similar local authorities.

24. The experiences and progress of care leavers have deteriorated since the last inspection. High caseloads for personal advisers are impacting on the ability to deliver an effective service. While the timeliness of completing pathway plans has improved, the quality of planning for the majority of care leavers is poor, and interventions often lack focus and direction. Visits to care leavers are not sufficiently timely or purposeful. Assessments do not routinely take account of children's histories or vulnerabilities, and young people are not actively involved in the development or shaping of plans for their future. As a result, young people are not consistently achieving good outcomes, and a small but significant number are living in circumstances of increased risk and need. However, this has not led to a re-assessment of their needs in the light of changed circumstances.
25. Effective support is provided by the virtual school to post-16 children in care and care leavers in order to assist them into appropriate employment, education or training. However, preparation of young people for independence is inconsistent, which means that some children are not equipped with the necessary skills to manage well in their current accommodation or in preparation for adulthood.

### **The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families is inadequate**

26. The local authority has not progressed a number of key areas identified as requiring improvement at the last inspection, for example services to children on the edge of care and care leavers. This has impacted negatively on the experiences and outcomes of this group of young people. The local authority identified through their self-assessment the majority of areas that require improvement. However, plans in place to address these are not sufficiently rigorous and have not been reviewed. Inspectors also found weaknesses of which the local authority were not aware, such as the deficits within the allegation management service and 16- 17-year-old homeless young people. A planned local government re-organisation of Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole into a single local authority, and the delivery of a number of frontline services, such as the out-of-hours children's service and multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), in partnership with other authorities, has inhibited the ability of the local authority to deliver timely service improvements. A reduction in the number of senior leaders has also impacted on the capacity of the local authority to ensure effective oversight of service performance to deliver practice improvements.
27. Members and senior strategic leaders have worked together to prioritise children's services and develop a shared, joined-up approach to their

development and delivery. Work has been undertaken to increase council members' understanding of children's social care. This has resulted in continued financial commitment to develop services, ensuring the delivery of a number of priority areas, such as the out-of-hours service, increasing the number of frontline managers and the development of better-resourced smaller teams. However, senior leaders have not been sufficiently appraised of the impact of service developments and whether this has led to expected practice improvements. In addition, available performance information and auditing activity is not sufficiently comprehensive to enable senior leaders to effectively scrutinise practice and evaluate the difference that this is making to improving outcomes for children. The absence of effective monitoring and regular review of improvement priorities means that the senior management team is not driving plans effectively in order to ensure that all improvements are delivered within timescales that meet children's needs.

28. Bournemouth local authority has established a number of strong strategic partnerships, and relationships with the judiciary and CAFCASS are constructive. There is good joint planning and service provision with health partners and housing services to build the emotional resilience of children in care and enable care leavers to secure housing tenancies, helping with stability into adulthood. A small but increasing number of young people are remaining with their foster carers until the age of 21 or are starting apprenticeships. However, while council members regularly receive reports on areas of service development and performance information, and are actively engaged in corporate parenting activities, there has not been effective scrutiny or challenge to senior leaders in relation to performance of the virtual school or care leavers service in achieving good outcomes for children or the lack of pace in improvement activity.
29. While the local authority and the virtual school provide good support to schools, the level of challenge is not effective in holding them to account for the progress of children in care. As a result, some schools work more successfully with the virtual school than others to ensure that all children in care are supported effectively and are achieving good outcomes. Virtual school leaders are not making use of available information to accurately identify and address issues such as the high level of authorised absence for children in care. Equally, there is no analysis of pupils' achievements with sufficient precision to target areas in which standards are particularly low. The local authority does not robustly monitor pupils who attend school on a part-time timetable. As a result, senior leaders are unable to hold to account those schools that do not return pupils to full-time education to ensure the pupils have every opportunity to achieve their potential.
30. Current arrangements for sharing information and coordinating responses to children at high or moderate risk of sexual exploitation or children who go missing across the partnership is not sufficiently rigorous. The local authority does not meet regularly with partner agencies at a senior level. As a result, opportunities to identify themes or patterns of exploitation and coordinate multi-

agency responses are missed. Equally, senior leaders within the local authority do not track and review children at risk of sexual exploitation as a group to assess whether plans or interventions in place are effective in reducing risk and addressing need in a timely way.

31. Management oversight of frontline practice is not effective in some teams. Managers are not consistently rigorous in monitoring and challenging the quality of social work practice to improve outcomes for children. The restructuring of services to increase frontline management capacity and oversight of practice has improved the regularity of supervision. However, the quality of supervision across and within teams is too variable and is not consistently reflective, directive nor does it identify drift and delay. Senior leaders have taken some remedial action although this has not secured sufficient improvement to address the underlying causes in order to improve practice in some teams.
32. The local authority has improved the range and quality of performance information available since the last inspection, and regular meetings with frontline managers are increasing ownership of performance. This is driving improvements in compliance-related practice, such as the timeliness of completing assessments. However, it is still not sufficiently rigorous to provide an accurate picture of the quality of frontline practice and the difference that this is making for children. While current performance reports identify any changes in performance and compliance, leaders do not sufficiently analyse or focus on the quality of key activities to inform whether service changes have led to improved practice.
33. Regular auditing of case files is undertaken by the local authority, but the experiences of children are not yet being effectively captured to inform leaders of the quality of practice or to inform service improvements. While findings from individual audits are provided to frontline managers and social workers, the absence of a mechanism to review whether actions have been delivered and have improved children's circumstances limits the value of the audit. Themes identified and disseminated from audit activity are not being effectively utilised by leaders to understand and improve the quality of social work practice. As a result, leaders are not making best use of audits to drive forward service improvement.
34. The local authority has been successful in recruiting and retaining social workers, reducing the reliance on agency staff and stabilising the workforce. There is a clear and comprehensive range of development opportunities available, with good links to the Pan Dorset Health and Social Care Academy based at Bournemouth University. Social workers are positive about working in Bournemouth, and caseloads are manageable for the majority of workers. In teams such as the CIN/CP and children in care teams, these developments have had a positive impact on children's experiences and progress in achieving good outcomes. However, there remain capacity issues in the MASH and assessment

team, which contribute to delays in the timeliness and quality of social work practice.



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