

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
Textphone 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Hannah Woodhouse
Executive Director Children and Education
Bristol City Council
City Hall
Bristol BS1 5TR

Dear Ms Woodhouse

Focused visit to Bristol City Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Bristol City Council children's services on 3 to 4 December 2025. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Shabana Warne and John Roughton.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need and child protection planning, including children who live in private fostering arrangements.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Headline findings

Committed and determined political and corporate leadership is bringing positive change to children in Bristol. Since the last inspection, additional investment in children's services and collaborative partnerships have reinforced the strategic ambition set out for children in the council's new corporate strategy and the wider city's 'One City Plan': for children to be at the heart of all council priorities and activity. Most children in need, and children who are the subject of a children protection plan, are receiving the right type of help at the right time, and benefit from well-supported multi-agency planning. The support provided to children who are living in private fostering arrangements has improved significantly. Led by a stable senior leadership team and mostly permanent workforce, the implementation of a new children's services model has enhanced social work practice and the support children receive.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?¹

- The timeliness, consistency and quality of safety plans for children (outcome 3, national framework).
- The quality of recording of reflective discussions within supervisions records (enabler 2, national framework).

Main findings

Children and families receive appropriate and proportionate support and services that reflect their levels of need. Children's needs are understood and are supported well by practitioners. Child and family assessments, and children's plans, are detailed, clear and include the views and voices of all family members including the child. Practitioners make best use of chronologies and genograms to reference and understand concerns about children within the context of the family network. Most children in need plans are regularly reviewed to consider progress and impact.

Practitioners build trusting relationships with children and help children and their families to engage with the support provided. Visits to children are frequent and at a level that reflects their needs. Practitioners work creatively with children using direct work to help children express their wishes and feelings, to help them to understand their experiences and to make sense of their own thoughts and experiences. Practitioners have a clear awareness and respect for children's identities and capture these clearly within their work.

When children are at risk of harm, management decisions to hold child protection strategy discussions, child protection investigations and initial child protection conferences are appropriate. These meetings and conferences are well attended by relevant multiagency professionals and immediate and future actions to safeguard children are thoroughly considered and planned. Practitioners work inclusively whenever possible and engage children and parents at every stage of their intervention.

Children's safety and wellbeing are promoted by the family and professional networks around them. Most child protection plans are child focused and detailed. Social workers chair core groups effectively that result in child protection plans being updated and reviewed and include clear timescales for actions. Child protection review conferences are timely and well attended by partner agencies. Families are routinely invited and supported to attend conferences. Social work reports clearly capture parents', carers' and children's views well, and decisions to continue or end child protection plans are inclusive and underpinned by clear multi-agency

¹ The areas for improvement have been cross-referenced with the outcomes, enablers or principles in the [Children's Social Care: National Framework](#). This statutory guidance sets out the purpose, principles for practice and expected outcomes of children's social care.

discussions. The combined quality of social work practice and purposeful interventions are evident in helping to reduce risk for children and improve their situations.

Most child in need and child protection plans for children are responsive and reflect the level of risk for children, their changing needs and the progress they are making. When safety planning is completed with families, these plans are mostly well-constructed using family friendly language and are clear about the role family members need to play. For some children, safety planning is not swift enough or reviewed regularly. Not all safety plans contain sufficient information for families to understand the seriousness of the concerns and what action will be taken if plans are not followed.

While the local authority response to neglect is not consistently clear, most children at risk of or experiencing neglect are supported with multi-agency interventions that are timely and proportionate. Risks to children who are harmed or are at risk of harm from parental substance misuse are quickly identified and understood by practitioners. Children benefit from specialist support provided by a dedicated young person service. While well-coordinated multi-agency interventions are making a positive difference for most children, a small number of children have experienced cumulative harm and have lived in situations of neglect for too long, although appropriate action has now been taken.

When risks and concerns for children escalate, or do not sufficiently reduce, managers appropriately escalate into the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline. Practitioners appropriately engage the child's wider family and friends' network to help provide any support needed. Letters before proceedings are written to parents using clear language that supports them to understand the concerns that need to be addressed to avoid the need for court action. Managers provide strong and robust oversight of the decision-making and ensure work is completed in agreed timescales.

Decisions to issue care proceedings are taken swiftly if children's circumstances do not further improve. Children are well supported and sensitively kept informed about the work undertaken with their families and plans that are made for their future.

Children and families are beginning to benefit from the recently established connecting families service, which provides flexible and responsive support to families to help prevent children coming into care. Alongside specialist interventions, workers engage and draw on the wider family network to support children to remain at home. Although it is early days for this service, indications are showing it is having a positive impact for children and their families in strengthening relationships and children remaining at home when it is safe and appropriate for them to do so.

An increasing number of children in need who are at risk of harm outside the home are benefiting from the support of the new, safer connections team and a new partnership approach to managing risk. Creative individual work with children and group work initiatives are also helping to reduce risks to children outside of the home. While in its relative infancy, positive interventions by dedicated workers in the safer connections team are starting to be seen. They are helping to disrupt dangerous relationships and refocus children's interests and activities towards more positive options.

Since the last inspection in 2023, children living in private fostering arrangements receive a much improved and effective response to their needs. The suitability and duration of their private fostering arrangement are thoroughly assessed and monitored regularly by practitioners and senior managers. Awareness raising has also been strengthened to make sure all partners, schools, faith groups and police are kept well informed and reminded of their responsibilities to these children.

Senior leaders and managers benefit from robust performance management information and well-established quality assurance activity to give them a comprehensive understanding of practice and the impact that services are having for children. A regular cycle of auditing is used effectively to improve practice. Managers use these opportunities well to recognise the positive impact that the practice framework and persistent and creative social work are having for children.

Children's services are benefiting from stable senior leadership underpinned by a strong and determined political and corporate strategic vision and ambition for children. Senior leaders have a good understanding of their strengths and areas for development. The accurate self-assessment of practice has provided the Director of Children's Services, and the extended senior leadership team, with a blueprint for the improvement journey. Progress has been made in key areas of practice alongside the introduction of new services and an enhanced and successful workforce development, recruitment and retention approach. There is an unwavering commitment to improving services and support for children, and leaders are now focusing on national reforms.

Social workers speak highly about the team support, space and ability to have reflective discussions, guidance and direction in the form of ad hoc supervision. While supervision is mostly timely, and practitioners find managers approachable and accessible, supervision records do not consistently reflect the detailed, rich and reflective discussions practitioners describe. While management directions are evident, there is a variation in the quality of recording of reflection and rationale for decision-making. This means that it would not be clear to children reading their records as to why decisions about their lives were made.

Workforce morale is high. Practitioners 'love' working for Bristol and feel highly supported by their managers. All practitioners, regardless of their length of time

working for Bristol, feel valued and enabled to make a positive difference in improving the lives of vulnerable children.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning the next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Shabana Warne
His Majesty's Inspector