

Inspection of Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 2 to 13 December 2024

Lead inspector: John Roughton, His Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care	Good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Senior leaders in Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP) have made significant progress since the last inspection in improving their services to better help, protect and care for their most vulnerable children. Leaders have worked relentlessly to strengthen, stabilise and train their workforce, enabling children to benefit from relationships with skilled and consistent social workers. Senior leaders know themselves well and are fully cognisant of the further practice developments needed to continue to improve children's lives and experiences. Children's services governance structures are now well embedded.

Since the last inspection, the pace of responding to identified issues has much improved and strong progress has been made in most of those areas identified as inadequate in the 2021 inspection.

Children benefit from timely decision-making in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), now ensuring that most children are quickly progressed to assessment when needed. Assessment quality is consistently thorough across the service, and

arrangements to assess and plan for children in private fostering and 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless are now strong.

Children at risk of exploitation and older care leavers do not consistently achieve positive outcomes. Leaders are in the process of addressing this and working to ensure the partnership response to the newly established BCP safeguarding partnership, early help and emotional well-being provision is fully integrated.

What needs to improve?

- Consistency in responding to the needs of children at risk of exploitation.
- The help and support offered to older care leavers.
- Safety planning for children and families where there are safeguarding concerns.

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

1. Children in BCP receive good help and protection when it is needed, with significant improvements in social work practice since the last inspection. Children benefit from timely, coordinated support that improves their lives.
2. Families have access to a wide range of early help services which meet their needs. The Targeted Early Help Service is strong, preventing needs from escalating and helping children thrive.
3. The MASH prioritises its response to new contacts and referrals effectively, ensuring prompt triage and matching most families to appropriate services. Consent to gather more information is sought from families and dispensed with only when necessary. Managers sign off contacts after ensuring a comprehensive triage is completed and provide thorough and timely review following triage. Thresholds are well understood and consistently applied. As a result, appropriate decisions are made about the right services to support children, at the right level.
4. Children and families receive the same timely and effective response from the out-of-hours service if concerns are raised outside office hours.
5. Social workers respond quickly to allegations of significant harm, holding well-attended strategy meetings and conducting timely, thorough investigations. Children are seen alone where appropriate and visited more frequently during these investigations. However, safety planning with children and families is underdeveloped and is not sufficiently clear or realistic as to actions to take should risks escalate.
6. Child protection investigations are comprehensive, and reports for conferences are detailed, presenting strengths and risks, and recommending appropriate,

necessary actions. Conferences are well attended. The contributions made by partners are considered and enhance children's well-being and safety.

7. Assessments for children needing statutory help, including disabled children, are timely and effective. Social workers consistently gather the right information from children, families and others to inform analysis of risk and need. Recommendations are clear and coupled with detailed management oversight, leading to children receiving the right and timely responses.
8. Most children are being helped, and families are making progress because of the services they receive, coordinated through their child in need or child protection plans. Most plans are proportionately written with clear actions for professionals and parents. Most children in the child and family first teams now have consistent social workers, leading to trusting relationships with children and families and regular, purposeful visits.
9. Social workers provide proactive, targeted help, including practical assistance and referrals to specialised services to address the underlying reasons that have caused concerns for children. Support is triggered at the earliest opportunity, including within the assessment service. Children with a disability and their families benefit from holistic responses, including short breaks and direct payments. Early consideration is given to family network meetings to draw out how the wider family can work together to meet the needs of their children.
10. Children's plans are reviewed regularly through core groups and multi-agency meetings. Family engagement is sought, and the views of children are reflected throughout, evaluating the effectiveness of plans and interventions. Strong management oversight ensures timely progress of children's plans and appropriate step-down, underpinned by a clear rationale when statutory services are no longer required.
11. Children are quickly escalated to the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline, with successful diversion away from proceedings for many. Most letters before proceedings are clear and sufficiently detailed about social workers' concerns. Parenting assessments enable parents to demonstrate their abilities to care for their children, while receiving multifaceted support in parallel.
12. When children go missing, they benefit from the alignment of return home interview specialists in the MASH, who see them promptly and identify push and pull factors affecting them. The development of high risk of harm (HROH) meetings and the missing, exploited and trafficked (MET) panel has strengthened responses to missing children, ensuring prompt planning and support when they are found.
13. Exploited children, and those at high risk of extra-familial harm, are identified quickly, with swift assessments and multi-agency planning. Information-sharing

forums identify opportunities for disrupting harm and locations of concern for partners to tackle. Social work support improves safety for most children, though practice is variable, with some social workers lacking curiosity and confidence in responding to risk. For a small number of children, risk is not being mitigated soon enough to protect them from further risk of harm.

14. Children in private fostering arrangements receive thorough assessments and regular reviews. Statutory checks are completed on carers to help inform assessments about their suitability.
15. Responses to homeless 16- and 17-year-olds are strong. Joint assessments are embedded and effective, with children receiving tailored support to understand their options in response to their housing and welfare needs.
16. Young carers receive exceptional support from a dedicated service, creatively meeting the specific needs of young carers, reducing isolation and increasing resilience.
17. The local authority designated officer service manages allegations against professionals effectively to protect children's safety.
18. For most children missing from education, coordinated multi-agency approaches are effective in reintegrating them into schooling. The local authority plays a key role in gathering data and identifying patterns related to children who are electively home educated, underpinned by embedded safeguarding systems for children who may be at risk or in need.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

19. Children are placed in care when their safety cannot be ensured within their families. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children similarly receive a timely response and are promptly accommodated and provided with support.
20. An appropriate variety of care options are considered and detailed assessments are completed to explore permanence for children as early as possible. Care proceedings are progressed promptly and effectively when needed. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) provide ongoing oversight of planning and write letters to children following reviews that explain decisions made. Review meetings are effective in overseeing the progress of plans and held within appropriate timescales.
21. Children's care plans comprehensively address children's needs and experiences, and contain appropriate contributions from children, family, social workers and other professionals. Crisp, sequential planning supports timely decisions for children, especially for those children with a plan for adoption.

22. Children in care are seen regularly and alone by their social workers, and the quality of these relationships is supported by proactive and thoughtful practice. Social workers use direct-work tools and life-story books to help children process and understand their past.
23. Children with a disability receive personalised support from dedicated social workers and other professionals as appropriate to their needs. Their wishes are carefully considered, and family time is encouraged in line with children's needs.
24. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive tailored support to ensure their health, safety, education and cultural and religious needs are catered for effectively. Social workers help them understand legal processes and, supported by consistent interpreters, plan for all eventualities.
25. Children in care are provided with opportunities to engage with the Unite and Insight participation groups, and the children's rights and engagement team is working on ways to support more children to voice their opinions. Celebration events recognise children's achievements and support their wider participation. The number of children taking up advocacy currently is low, and leaders are seeking to promote and extend this offer.
26. When children go missing from care, they are supported to return safely. Social workers identify their risks, and effective support is provided. However, not all workers have confidence in prioritising and planning for immediate intervention or disruption and leaders are enhancing training and support to address this.
27. Children in care are receiving help with their health and dental needs, including mental health support and access to therapy when necessary. Health assessments for children are completed within appropriate timescales.
28. Children are supported to attend and make progress in education. The virtual school holds high aspirations for all children in care, seen through improving attendance and academic outcomes. The virtual school's detailed oversight and children's individualised personal education plan targets contribute to this success.
29. Children are encouraged and supported to participate in various activities in line with their wishes, such as going to youth theatre, swimming, football and going on a range of holidays.
30. Most children in care live in stable homes. Frequent senior management oversight of children's progress towards achieving permanence is achieved through permanence planning and legal gateway meetings. There is a consistent focus on permanence options, including kinship care and reunification, with plans regularly reviewed by leaders.

31. When this is in their best interests, children are placed with kinship carers who are promptly assessed and well supported. Special guardianship orders (SGOs) are appropriately considered and progressed.
32. Social workers ensure children live with long-term foster carers, considering their changing needs. When children are in long-term foster homes, foster carers are fully integrated into decision-making processes. Children maintain contact with their families when it is safe to do so, including with siblings when they live apart.
33. Children placed at a distance from Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole are visited regularly by social workers and receive appropriate services. They are supported to return to their home area and reunite with family members when safe and possible. Children in residential care benefit from specialist support, and long-term plans are made to help them move to foster care or return to family care when appropriate.
34. A small number of children are placed in unregistered settings due to placement availability issues. While this is not acceptable, these placements are very closely and thoroughly monitored by social workers and senior leaders, who encourage settings to register, while searches to identify more suitable placements are carried out.
35. Social workers and managers act promptly to support children and carers at risk of placement breakdown, and to return children home to their families from care when this is in their best interests. With a focus on comprehensive, creative and purposeful help, the keeping families connected and the recently piloted reunification teams have provided invaluable input to support the quality and timeliness of these plans. Many more children have a care plan to return to their families and achieving timely and successful outcomes for these children and their families is a priority for senior leaders, through the continuation of the reunification team.
36. The fostering service provides effective recruitment, assessment, training and support for fostering and kinship carers, helping to ensure that most children are settled in their homes and are well cared for. Foster carers appreciate and benefit from the support, training and opportunities for development provided by the fostering service. The fostering panel meets regularly, providing quality assurance and feedback for carers.
37. The regional adoption agency (Aspire Adoption Services) provides effective and timely responses for children with adoption plans. There is a strong focus on finding suitable adopters, including early permanence, and for older children and sibling groups.

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

38. Children in care are now benefiting from the earlier allocation of personal advisers (PAs), who build effective, supportive and trusting relationships with them in preparation for adulthood.
39. Most care leavers have a positive and trusting relationship with their PA. PAs are knowledgeable about their lives, both before and during care. PAs are tenacious and creative in how they build and maintain these relationships, providing intensive practical and emotional support, celebrating their successes, allowing young people to take some appropriate risks, and advocating for them to have a second chance when things do not go to plan.
40. Older care leavers do not receive the same proactive offer from the local authority. As care leavers approach 21, PAs and their managers consider whether they are sufficiently able to manage without the support of a dedicated PA. These young people are afforded an extended offer, with little contact from the service and a duty system that is limited in the help it can provide and is not always responsive. A small number of care leavers over 21 continue to receive dedicated PA support, for example if in higher education or they are unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people. However, there are more care leavers over 21 who need such a level of support. During the inspection, senior leaders appropriately acknowledged this and took immediate steps to review and improve these arrangements.
41. Younger care leavers are supported well by their carers or key workers to develop independence skills. They receive practical support to help with cooking and shopping, and guidance about managing money, as well as support with their emotional needs and managing their relationships with their families and friends.
42. When the PA is a consistent professional in the young person's life, they regularly visit and use various media to stay in touch and to stay alert to any changing circumstances, needs or potential risks. Decisions are made alongside young people, carefully balanced with the need to act in their best interests if there are concerns that a young person may be unsafe.
43. Pathway plans set out clear steps needed to help a young person navigate towards their own goals and aspirations. They are created with young people, written with and to them, and include the early consideration of accommodation options through a joint housing assessment.
44. The virtual school knows young people very well. They use this knowledge to anticipate and respond quickly to any potential dips in attendance or outcomes or if young people are at risk of dropping out. This includes creative work to ensure that support can be adapted to maintain education. The impact of this

joined-up approach and improved stability is evident in the reducing number of care leavers who are not in education, training or employment. The percentage of pupils who transfer to education, training or employment at the end of Year 11 has increased since the last inspection and is well above national comparators.

45. Most care leavers feel safe, and risk is managed well, including signs of potential harassment or exploitation. They live in homes where they feel safe, but moving into their own tenancy is a slow process, leaving some young people living in accommodation that does not meet their long-term needs. Although many young people thrive in 'staying put' arrangements, which have been a secure base for them to take their first steps into adulthood, the delay in identifying their own tenancy leaves them frustrated.
46. The local offer for care leavers lacks ambition and is not accessible to all. Many young people describe difficulties in accessing their entitlements and say the offer does not fully meet their needs. For care leavers over 21 years of age, the offer is not widely publicised beyond those care leavers who are in higher education and fails to embrace the possibilities offered by corporate departments and the wider community. Following consultation with young people, leaders have rightly recognised this, and the offer is being revised with care leavers and due to be republished in early 2025.
47. Care leavers benefit from a range of specialist services to ensure that their health needs can be met. PAs work closely with colleagues in adult services when care leavers have a disability, to ease transitions. If young people are struggling with their mental health or substance misuse, some services extend post-18 and have a positive impact.
48. Achievements are recognised at the care leaver annual Star Awards, where their talents, successes, courage and determination are celebrated across the council.
49. Care leavers participate in a range of activities beyond their education or employment, for example, the BCP football team, gym, badminton and boxing. However, this largely depends on young people identifying what they want to do rather than being offered new experiences. Their views are routinely sought, for example, through the recent Bright Spots survey and work on how to extend housing options, and the revision of the local offer.
50. The 333 care leavers hub continues to be a warm, inviting and valuable resource for young people who want to meet with PAs, get involved in the work of the children's rights team or just to have somewhere to go to relax.
51. Care leavers under 21 who are in custody receive regular contact from their PAs. PAs work closely with offender managers and probation colleagues to support these young people to access education and training opportunities to

improve their life chances on release. For those over 21, this support decreases, leading to uncertainty about options on release. Similarly, there is limited support for young parents over 21, including those whose children have a social worker due to concerns for their welfare.

52. Care leavers who entered care as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are supported effectively by their PAs. They are supported to keep in touch with families in their countries of origin when safe to do so, and are helped to engage in activities, learn new skills and progress with their education.

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

53. Senior leaders in Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council recognise and prioritise the needs of their children. Political leaders are highly supportive of the children's agenda. Partners have described a positively transformed service, unrecognisable from that found at the last inspection. Despite the financial pressures the council faces, investment in strengthening services in response to increased demand is a continuing commitment.
54. The appointment of the corporate director in early 2022 has brought increased rigour and pace to improvement, and a positive shift in the quality and impact of partnership working between the council and key strategic allies. Work is now progressing well on developing joint responses to early help, emotional well-being services and the newly established BCP safeguarding partnership.
55. Leaders have made effective use of their sector-led improvement partners, Department for Education improvement adviser and Ofsted monitoring visits to challenge and support them in ensuring that positive progress is being made and sustained. Leaders have been receptive to challenge during this inspection. They have reflected and responded positively to feedback received to seek to further enhance support to children and young people, for example, in relation to older care leavers and young people at risk of exploitation.
56. The commitment to corporate parenting is strong in BCP. The strategic plan has been refined in line with aims and priorities mutually agreed with the children and young people consulted with. The plan is overseen by the corporate parenting board, co-chaired by the lead member and a care-experienced young person. The voice and influence of children and young people in service development are being further developed, with more young people being encouraged and supported to actively engage in the work of the board.
57. Leaders and managers have prioritised the need to ensure that children's voices inform plans for their own lives, and this is now well embedded through, for example, children in care reviews and pathway planning.

58. The sufficiency strategy provides an informed analysis of the profile of children in care and clearly identifies the key themes and challenges in providing sufficient placements for children and care leavers. The strategy includes a comprehensive action plan in line with this analysis. Work is now under way with local providers to address existing gaps in provision based on assessed needs, including bespoke accommodation for unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people and supported accommodation options for care leavers.
59. Leaders are committed to continuous improvement and have developed a strong learning culture across children's services. Recording practice is consistently strong in BCP, with records written to children in age-appropriate language thoroughly embedded at all levels, so if children wish to access their records now or in the future, they would see themselves at the centre of planning and decision-making.
60. The performance framework has been significantly improved and strengthened since the last inspection, helping leaders to identify granular issues and trends in practice and workload capacity across the service and respond swiftly to emerging pressures.
61. Quality assurance (QA) arrangements are now effective. A comprehensive, holistic and learning approach to QA is well established. Regular practice learning reviews with social workers are now embedded, helping to improve outcomes for children and support practice improvement for individual social workers. Thematic practice learning weeks are much valued by workers in helping to improve their learning and enhance their practice.
62. Social workers are very positive about working for BCP. Senior leaders have established a supportive and caring organisational culture, evident across the workforce, and workers feel respected and valued by leaders at all levels.
63. Strengthening and stabilising the workforce is a priority for leaders in BCP and has been a significant success since the last inspection due to internal and external workforce strategies. This means that most children are now benefiting from stable relationships with their workers. There is a comprehensive workforce development strategy in place. The workforce development service trains cohorts of newly qualified staff effectively, and apprenticeship options are helping to enable more unqualified staff within the council to become social workers.

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