

London Borough of Bexley

Inspection of children's social care services

Inspection dates: 9 July 2018 to 20 July 2018

**Lead inspector: Marcie Taylor
Her 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 and care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding

Services for children and families in Bexley have improved significantly since the previous inspection in 2014. Leaders and senior managers provide inspirational leadership that is both ambitious and highly effective in improving outcomes for children. Professionals across the partnership highly value this leadership and the strong ethos that permeates their work, namely 'doing the right thing for children' by keeping families together where it is safe to do so. To support this, leaders and managers have successfully created a whole-system partnership that is highly effective and wholeheartedly committed to building effective safety networks around children and families.

Children who need help and protection receive an outstanding service, with highly effective help and support provided from day one of an assessment. Creative direct work and consistently good and high-quality assessments are undertaken by a skilled, stable and well-supported workforce. These lead to dynamic and proportionate plans and interventions. Children's views routinely inform assessments, support and safety plans. This makes a positive difference to improving their circumstances.

Children in care receive a good service from workers who know them well. Carers provide stable homes and are supportive and ambitious for them. The local authority has an effective mechanism that assures them about the quality of practice across all service areas. For this reason, it has in place ambitious and credible plans to further improve services for all care leavers so that they receive consistently good planning and support into adulthood.

What needs to improve

- The system for recording all return home interviews and the effective use of aggregated intelligence.
- The oversight and monitoring systems in place to track the timeliness of work in pre-proceedings and on contingency planning.
- The numbers of children in long-term foster care who have a comprehensive record of their early childhood experiences.
- Care leavers' access to their health history and to mental health services, and the comprehensiveness and aspiration of pathway plans.

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

1. The family well-being service established in June 2016, together with a wide range of commissioned early help services, is providing highly effective help and support to children and families in Bexley. The offer is well publicised, and partners and the public are well aware of it. A broad range of support is provided by highly skilled practitioners who work effectively together. Creative direct work and good assessments lead to dynamic plans, all of which are making a positive difference in improving children's circumstances. A relentless focus on providing early support results in a high number of families receiving the right level of help at the right time, with fewer families needing statutory intervention.
2. Timely response to appropriate referrals made by partners to the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) results in effective multi-agency working to address presenting concerns. A telephone consultation line helps to manage the anxieties of other professionals and leads to a consistent application of thresholds. These are clearly set out in the multi-agency guidance that was implemented in June 2017 and is used daily in practice. This document provides clear expectations about the response of services and professions to differing levels of need and includes examples to help partners exercise professional judgement.
3. A domestic abuse hub considers the impact for children, who, on the presenting information, have been involved in, or have witnessed, incidents of domestic abuse. Since January 2018, a domestic abuse specialist social worker has been undertaking risk assessments on all cases that are assessed as medium- or standard-risk by the police. This ensures that appropriate support is put in place quickly.
4. The daily MASH meeting provides an additional layer of scrutiny regarding decision-making and ensures that all actions are responsive and proportionate to risk. Management decision-making is effective, timely and child-centred, with a clear rationale that identifies next steps and a seamless transfer into family well-being or assessment services. A child-specific service provides appropriate out-of-hours support, and effective links are made by staff working into the next day, which provides continuity and extra resource within the MASH.
5. The ethos underpinning the well-embedded social work methodology in Bexley is that children should grow up in their own families and other networks when it is safe for them to do so. This approach is underpinned by the belief that families have strengths and can identify solutions to their difficulties alongside relationships with workers who know their children well. This is key to achieving and sustaining positive change. Inspectors saw this very well evidenced in almost all cases seen on this inspection.

6. Highly effective help and support are provided from day one of an assessment. Family-based relationship work starts with the whole family network and is supported and underpinned by a clear operating model. Assessments are timely and within timescales that are suitable for the child and family. Good use of genograms, chronologies and consideration of family history informs analysis. Children's experiences are clearly visible, and their views shine through in assessments. Children are seen swiftly and are seen multiple times, in keeping with the level of concern. Assessments thoughtfully reflect culture and heritage, and what this means for a child and family in the context of living in Bexley. Very thoughtful consideration of the support needs of parents, including fathers, is evident, balancing the needs of child and adults effectively to achieve sustainable change. Social workers effectively advocate for children. There is good and substantive evidence that children are listened to. This informs all assessments, support and safety plans and reviews.
7. Consultations and conversations are encouraged and take place between professionals to ensure that the right level of support is offered to children and families. Careful consideration is given to risks to children and which support systems and services would work best for children and families. For example, records demonstrate thoughtful exploration of whether a child in need plan or child protection plan is needed or whether the family well-being service could offer the most appropriate, proportionate and less intrusive support. There is no difference in the offer and quality of support to children, whatever the plan. This is a significant strength within the borough.
8. S47 enquiries are effective and timely in reducing risk to children. Risk is managed very well and uniquely to each child and their circumstances. In complex work, a 'different way through' is navigated, with interventions that are creative, rather than being constrained by compliance with process. This is making a positive difference. This is effective because of the consistently high quality of assessment and immediate help and support provided to families. Family network meetings quickly identify support networks around the child and family, including professionals and members of the wider family. This helps to increase resilience and reduce risk. A range of checks and balances within the system provide the opportunity to continually reflect on the level of risk and support to families.
9. Management oversight of frontline practice is systematic and purposeful. It is undertaken by confident and competent managers. Supervision is valued by practitioners, and is prioritised, regular, of good quality, well recorded in children's records and in the main is reflective. This results in consistently high-quality plans that are making a positive difference to children's lives.
10. Multi-agency partners are very well engaged in child protection core groups and child in need meetings. This ensures that they helpfully contribute to

assessments and plans and aid decision-making. Reviews are timely and regular, and collaboration between professionals and parents, using scaling tools, measures progress for children. Imaginative and creative direct work with children is intuitive and adaptive to individual needs, including for disabled children who have complex needs. Shared with parents and carers, this work helps families make sustainable changes. This is a real strength. Workers have 'broken down barriers' in order to help parents develop insight into their parenting and how to make changes. They use direct work generated by children or build trusting relationships with them to support meaningful conversations. Practical solutions, alongside emotional support, are provided to improve outcomes for children, for example help with housing and benefit applications.

11. The strategic and operational response to vulnerable adolescents is very strong. There is excellent multi-agency working in relation to children who go missing, those at risk of child sexual exploitation and other contextual safeguarding concerns. Every incident of going missing, from care, home or from education, is considered at a weekly missing panel to help ensure that proportionate and joined-up support services keep children as safe as possible within the community. This means that children have trusted, knowledgeable adults with whom they can talk about their experiences. Effective preventative strategies and commissioned services protect children from harm, for example the use of the local professional football team and other private providers to reach out to children to provide support and diversionary activities.
12. Panels of professionals who oversee progress for children are well interlinked, and good communication between partners ensures that they are effective. Very good inter-agency collaboration and information-sharing happens between workers from all key agencies. Children who pose the highest risk are well known by professionals, who make good use of local intelligence of places of concern, people and gangs in order to develop joint plans to minimise risk.
13. For children missing from home, the majority are offered return interviews after incidents by either the family well-being service if they are under 12 years old, or targeted youth support, if they are over 12 years old. Those children who are already known to services are provided with an opportunity to talk to a trusted adult who they already know after missing incidents. This improves children's level of engagement and helps reduce risks associated with missing incidents. The local authority does not have a single system to record and hold all information, including return home interviews, and this currently limits a full understanding of the effectiveness of practice in this area.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers are good

14. Many families receive very effective intensive support within pre-proceedings of the public law outline (PLO), which results in more children being able to remain safely cared for by their immediate and wider families. Effective work seen by the staying together team has helped children on the edge of care remain at home, or children in care return home safely. Good multi-agency working ensures that the needs of very vulnerable children are met and that their living arrangements at home remain as stable as possible. Work in pre-proceedings and on contingency planning is not consistently timely and, in some cases, leads to potential for delays for children, including emergency applications to court should they be unable to remain safely at home.
15. For children who return home, thoughtful transition plans are responsive to the children's needs and wishes. The possibility of children returning home, including to live with members of the wider family, is actively and continually considered for all children. Any changes in circumstances or change of wishes or feelings for children prompt active and relentless consideration as to whether a safe return can be achieved. Consideration of whether this is right for each child is at the forefront of planning. Inspectors saw an example of parents effectively supported to work with a charity around the inappropriateness of physical chastisement. As a result, the parents made huge progress, enabling a change in care planning. This led to the children returning home.
16. Key decisions for children in care are informed by holistic assessments that capture up-to-date events or changing needs. Care plans are adapted accordingly. Plans are comprehensive and cover the needs of children well. All relevant people are involved, including parents and placement professionals. Emerging risks are well understood and proportionately responded to, meaning that children are helped and protected when this is needed. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) spend time with children outside meetings, eliciting their views, as well as the views of birth parents and carers. Reviews are child-centred meetings and children contribute well.
17. Social workers know their children well and see them regularly, often more frequently than their plan requires. Effective, direct work helps children to understand their care histories, and children are well prepared for placement moves. Social workers and other professionals in children's lives have high aspirations for children and take pride in celebrating their achievements.
18. Social workers value and make good use of the weekly consultation meetings facilitated by child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHs), the virtual school and the children looked after nurse. For this reason, the physical and

emotional needs of children in care are considered well and are appropriately responded to. Inspectors also found effective direct work being undertaken by multi-agency partners. Targeted youth support workers, mentors from the virtual school for children placed out of borough and CAMHs workers all provide intensive support to prevent a child being placed in secure provision.

19. Some good examples were found of direct work being undertaken with children to help them to express their views and to understand what is happening in their lives. This included caring and sensitive reflections about children's experiences. Although life-story work is being done, not all children in long-term foster care have a comprehensive record to help them make sense of their early childhood.
20. Social workers routinely attend initial health assessments, which are undertaken by community paediatricians, and are timely. A specialist CAMHs service for children looked after and those with a plan for adoption focuses on stabilising the network around the child in order to give direct work the best chance of success. Children in care wait no longer than eight weeks for an initial consultation. Appropriate screening and referral to sexual health services is made for those where it is needed. The virtual school funds an emotional well-being practitioner whose focus is on children who 'can't or won't' engage with CAMHs. This service is being extended to care leavers to improve access to adult mental health services. The clinical commissioning group (CCG) funded a review of placements with therapeutic support to devise a 'preferred providers' list based on quality and impact of provision. The local authority has high ambitions for children in care and care leavers to be in good physical and mental health. Well-coordinated services and initiatives are in place for children in care. However, this does not yet extend to all care leavers.
21. There is a good and improving education service in place for children in care that focuses on the right priorities and brings about positive outcomes for them. Committed staff know individual children and young people well; they go to great lengths to ensure that they benefit from the best opportunities on offer, whether that is at school or in making the transition to apprenticeships or college. They work effectively with other professionals and successfully target their interventions in a timely way to support children's learning and progress, including the high proportion of those who have special educational needs. The timeliness and quality of personal education plans have improved, although there is still room for further improvement, particularly in ensuring reliability in their quality and greater consistency in assessing children's progress.
22. Educational outcomes for children at the end of primary and secondary education compare very favourably with the performance of children in care nationally. For instance, the small group of children leaving primary schools in 2017 made better progress than their peers locally and children in care

nationally in reading, writing and mathematics. The focus on progress in English and mathematics is also reflected in the progress and attainment of those leaving school at the end of Year 11. There are also some notable successes for some young people in gaining A levels and going on to university.

23. Good progress is made by children in many aspects of their lives because of the high-quality care and support provided by their carers and the professional team around them. The fostering service recruits, assesses and supports foster carers effectively in order to enable a wide range of choice of placements for children, including an increasing number of placements in the Pioneer Fostering scheme. These placements offer an intensively supported family environment with a focus on collaborative problem-solving as a response to complex needs. Children placed typically present challenging behaviours that undermine their ability to live safely within a family.
24. There is careful consideration of placement matching, which includes whether children can live with their brothers and sisters. Placement moves and transition to new placements are carefully considered and well managed. This means that placements have a better chance of stability and success. Sensitive consideration of family time, in line with the wishes of children, further promotes placement stability. Most placements, including out of borough placements, are of a high quality.
25. A full range of permanence options are considered and achieved in a timely way. This includes consistent use of fostering for adoption and innovative use of connected persons, as well as special guardianship orders (SGOs), adoption and long-term fostering. This means that more children safely remain with their parents or extended family. Timely ratification of long-term, permanent foster placements provides children with certainty about their future.
26. Adoption practice is exceptional. It is very child-centred and innovative. Children are matched well with adopters, with extensive use of fostering for adoption. This means that children benefit from very early permanence without delay. Adoption support services are strong, meaning that children have the best chance of success in their adoptive families. The adoption team provides adults with comprehensive support that focuses firmly on children. The feedback from the families who used the adoption service is very positive.
27. Personal advisers make significant and tenacious efforts to stay in touch with young people leaving care, particularly young people in custody. Personal advisers have worked hard to build rapport, and several young people reported positively about the quality of support and advice offered to them. However, for some young people the high turnover of staff in this area has

meant that they have not benefited from consistent relationships with workers.

28. Pathway planning varies in quality. Some pathway plans are good; they are aspirational and cover all aspects of a young person's life and clearly demonstrate they were involved in its development. However, some pathway plans are not thorough enough or updated after significant changes in young people's circumstances, and actions are not progressed in a timely way. Not all young people spoken to have received a copy of their plan.
29. Care leavers' health histories are not systematically recorded on young people's files, and not all young people have them. However, care leavers are supported to have access to health professionals in the community. The virtual school has invested in an emotional well-being practitioner to focus on children in care who do not engage with CAMHs, and this is to be extended to care leavers in order to facilitate appropriate access to adult mental health services.
30. The proportions of 17- and 18-year-old care leavers who are in education, employment and training (EET) compare positively with statistical neighbours and national rates. Nonetheless, the virtual school service has rightly identified that it could do more to support young people in sustaining education, employment and training opportunities, and it has taken several steps to focus more sharply on this, such as the new appointment of a supported employment coordinator. More work is being progressed, with the appointment of an apprenticeship development worker to create additional opportunities for young people.
31. There is a range of accommodation available for young people, depending on their individual needs. This includes staying put. Several young people were welcomed back to staying put placements when they had tested out independence and found that they were not ready to take this step. Inspectors found evidence of young people returning home when it was appropriate to do so, with extra support provided by key workers when accommodation had changed.
32. There is an established approach for young people to gain appropriate independence skills before applying for a secure council tenancy, via semi-independent accommodation and private tenancies. Appropriate use of key workers from the 'My Life' service supports young people with this transition. A bite-sized 'entitlements' guide for young people leaving care was launched in April 2018. A more comprehensive guide setting out the new local offer is in development and will be published in October 2018.

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

33. Leaders in Bexley have significantly improved the quality of services to children since the previous inspection. The ambition for children and forward thinking and inspirational leadership are making a real difference. Their knowledge and insight of effective social work is exceptional, with children and staff at the centre of their thinking. Staff, managers and partners highly value their vision, visibility and strong ethos about 'doing it right' for children by keeping families together. The leadership team has set clear expectations, and their bold approach places meaningful relationships at the heart of practice. Needs are identified at the earliest opportunity and intervention is made at the lowest level. This is making a real difference to the quality and impact of social work practice.
34. Children feature highly on the council's corporate plan, and elected members are well informed about and well connected in the performance framework. As a result, they know the quality of practice well. Significant investment has increased staffing numbers and protected early help services. This approach supports the ethos and belief that children's needs are best met at the earliest opportunity and from within their family network. A strong commitment to preventative services such as the staying together team, the family well-being service and the positive families partnership means that children who can safely return home do so, or they are diverted from entering care unnecessarily.
35. The local authority and key stakeholders have taken a new approach to partnership working. Innovative approaches to engaging the partnership at both strategic and operational level have created conditions for effective multi-agency collaboration. A shared partnership vision and plan is closely aligned with new multi-agency guidance. This results in an offer of support rather than an entitlement to pass through a 'threshold' and is reflective of the commitment to working alongside families and with each other. This is pivotal in demonstrating the strength, influence and impact of whole-system partnership effectiveness and the real commitment to building the safety network around children and families. The quality of practice is tested through the innovative 'back to practice' approach and multi-agency learning hub, which identifies practice issues quickly and carefully considers ways to improve outcomes. The learning hub offers high support and high challenge, with the focus on what works well. This is a dynamic, responsive and proactive system that is making a real difference to the quality and effectiveness of multi-agency work.
36. There is a broad and holistic approach that ensures a continued evaluation of performance. The 10-week performance management cycle is highly effective and informs a dynamic understanding of the quality of performance and practice, for instance the low incidence of child protection plans for disabled

children, and the quality of decision-making in the MASH. This results in responsive individual and themed audits that test out the local authority's understanding of its data and the quality of practice. Practice week then provides a comprehensive understanding of the impact on children's experiences.

37. Inspectors consistently saw practice that reflected feedback from children and families, for example regular attendance at community forums for disabled children, and a parents' survey that is being used to inform the recommissioning of services. Learning from complaints is systematically analysed and informs practice developments, for example improvements in case recording and core group minutes being sent out in a timely manner.
38. The local authority is a committed corporate parent. The children looked after and care leaver strategy 2017–2020 sets out how it will act as any good parent would. The local authority recognises the need to improve the offer of help and support to care leavers and, as a result, has undertaken a root and branch review of the quality of practice, informed by the experiences of care leavers, and has put in place measures to address deficits. A comprehensive analysis of placement sufficiency for children in care in Bexley has led to fostering recruitment targeted at areas of most need, including specialist foster carers as part of the Pioneer Fostering scheme and significant increases in numbers of carers suitable for fostering for adoption. As a result, the local authority has had demonstrable success in the recruitment and retention of carers. This is making a real difference to the experiences of children in care.
39. Management oversight of practice is consistently strong across services and at all levels. This is reflected in exceptionally well written, meticulous, accurate case records, and enables effective decision-making, scrutiny and accountability to help children and families. This means that children will be helped to gain a clear understanding of the life-changing decisions made on their behalf. The social work model is fully embedded and provides an effective framework to enable meaningful family focused help and support. This extends out into partnerships in Bexley.
40. The local authority is successful in recruiting and retaining an increasingly permanent workforce. The workforce offer includes clear progression pathways, a talent management scheme and support for professional development to masters level. The effective and popular assessed year in supported employment (AYSE) programme has a very good reputation and is recognised by the Department for Education, with funding to further innovate in this area. The wrap-around support for AYSE enables the programme to develop skills when working with families who have complex needs early on in their careers, thus developing their competence and confidence in relationship-based social work.

41. Courageous conversations are the norm, with great importance placed on learning to collectively manage risk. This is making a real difference and contributes to staff remaining in Bexley because it is a safe and supportive place to work. The nurturing conditions created by leaders have enabled social work to flourish. The workforce is well supported to deliver the ethos of relationship-based social work. This is resulting in an increasingly stable workforce that feels valued, with manageable caseloads creating space for meaningful direct work with children. Inspectors saw reflective practice and very effective multi-agency working. Good practice is celebrated. Without exception, staff were incredibly positive about working in Bexley and the support and training they receive to improve children's lives.



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