

Brighton and Hove City Council

Inspection of children's social care services

Inspection dates: 9 July 2018 to 20 July 2018

**Lead inspector: Tara Geere
Her 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	Requires improvement
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

At the last inspection in 2015, the overall effectiveness of children's services in Brighton and Hove was judged to require improvement to be good. Since then, the senior leadership team, supported by strong cross-party political and corporate support, has worked effectively to improve services, and overall effectiveness is now good.

Senior leaders know their services well. All areas requiring improvement that were raised in this inspection were known to senior leaders. Leaders have already improved services, which has resulted in children in need of early help and children in need of protection receiving prompt and appropriate help in line with their needs. However, leaders are aware, through their own quality assurance monitoring, of the further work needed to improve practice for children in need. A small number of children living in private fostering arrangements do not have an allocated social worker and some children experience delay in the pre-proceedings stage of court work. Senior leaders have recognised deficits and have taken appropriate steps to improve the quality of commissioned return home interviews, but this work is at an early stage.

Children in care and care leavers receive a good service. Considerable work to improve planning for these children is resulting in timely child-centred work, which is having a positive impact on their lives.

Social workers' morale is high, and they enjoy working in Brighton and Hove. The decision not to use agency staff has improved children's relationships with social workers. At the time of the inspection, vacancies in some social work pods have reduced social worker capacity, resulting in a small number of children's cases being held by managers in two teams.

What needs to improve

- Case recording, including the recording of management oversight and supervision, to monitor children's progress and outcomes effectively.
- The response to children in need, including clear plans with appropriate actions and timescales and regular reviews through network meetings
- The progression of pre-proceedings work, in order to reduce unnecessary delay for children.
- The response to children who go missing from home and care, including the timeliness and recording of return home interviews to capture intelligence to inform service delivery.
- The allocation of private fostering and care leaver cases to workers, to allow timely statutory checks and regular visits and contact, in order to ensure that children live in safe arrangements to meet their needs.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection requires improvement to be good

1. Children's services in Brighton and Hove provide a joined-up response to the needs of vulnerable children and families. Children benefit from a wide range of community-based, collaborative, early help services. Co-location of early help workers (locally known as family coaches) at the front door for families (FDFF) ensures that children and families access the right support. The family coaches provide an effective response to enquiries by professionals and members of the public to ensure that children's needs are met at the earliest opportunity.
2. Children with more complex needs receive an effective, multi-agency response when they are referred to the FDFF. Timely information gathering and analysis, supported by clear management direction, ensures that children at risk of harm are protected. Parental consent is secured in most cases, although it is not always clearly recorded. Information sharing between partners in the FDFF is mainly timely and thorough. Nevertheless, shortfalls in capacity in respect of both social workers and health staff mean that there are some delays in progressing a very small minority of referrals.
3. Most children in need of social work support transfer swiftly to social work pods for further assessment. Assessments are comprehensive and are well-informed by information from involved agencies. The vast majority of assessments include good analysis of children's circumstances and needs.
4. Social workers show a good understanding of the children they work with; they seek children's views and carry out individual work with them. However, not all children in need have a plan that sets out how they are going to be supported. Network meetings do not consistently take place in a timely manner to develop and review children's plans. This means that although social workers support children in need, planning for them is not always co-ordinated effectively.
5. Social workers can describe the work they do with children well. However, there is considerable variability in the quality of case recording, including recording of management oversight, across all services. Where detailed recording is absent, it is not always possible to gain a good understanding of the child's experience, or whether visiting is purposeful, from the case record. Senior managers have sought to tackle these weaknesses, implementing an action plan, but it is too early for this to have had a positive impact.
6. Decisions to start child protection enquires are appropriate and timely. Enquiries include good information from professionals from a range of agencies, but the wider assessment of risk, and the rationale for the decision reached, is not always easy to understand due to the use of different recording documents. Multi-agency professionals support timely, well-

attended child protection conferences, which develop good outline plans that are progressed by the core group. Most plans are effective tools for setting out and monitoring how to reduce risks. However, some include too many actions and lack clear objectives to help parents and carers understand what needs to change. There is good use of advocates and interpreters to support children's and parents' engagement across all areas.

7. When children's needs escalate, social workers and managers take decisive action to initiate pre-proceedings. However, there are some delays in progressing pre-proceeding plans and holding important meetings, which can result in some cases not receiving a timely response. This is more evident in situations where risks to children are more complex or chronic. Where risks are clearer, action is more authoritative.
8. Social workers recognise contextual safeguarding risks well. Senior managers have worked purposefully across the partnership to tackle exploitation, including the growing problem of criminal exploitation, which presents challenges in Brighton and Hove. This has led to the development of a detailed understanding of risk in the area. The recently introduced adolescent vulnerability and risk meeting responds well to the growing concerns regarding children's vulnerability to the interconnected issues of sexual and criminal exploitation. These multi-agency meetings regularly review the level of risk for children and develop effective plans to offer timely direct help for children and their families, focusing on achieving sustainable progress for children.
9. The multi-agency adolescent service that works with children who are hard to engage and require intensive support is an example of good practice. Social workers are tenacious in seeking to build meaningful relationships with children, and this supports the reduction of risk effectively.
10. Disabled children benefit from high-quality, responsive support. The knowledgeable team recognises well the needs of disabled children and those of their non-disabled brothers and sisters both in terms of risk of harm and their broader needs.
11. Senior leaders have been proactive and responsive to concerns about the quality of work of a commissioned service to deliver return home interviews (RHIs) for children who go missing. Social workers make efforts to visit children and talk about missing episodes in order to understand the risks that children may face. However, these visits are not consistently recorded and are not always timely. This prevents information being used to support effective analysis of the push and pull factors or to gather important intelligence to identify patterns and trends to inform service delivery. Senior leaders have acted to strengthen their response to children who go missing, but it is too early to evidence the impact of this.

12. Case supervision is variable in terms of its quality. Supervision records do not always do justice to the quality of supervision reported by social workers. When supervision is recorded, it often lacks reflection or analysis, or rigour in driving the child's plan. Social workers value group supervision, which takes place regularly and includes the whole social work pod. This provides a useful forum for social workers to reflect on challenging issues and to consider how to solve any problems.
13. The local authority has worked hard to raise awareness of private fostering and works closely with local language schools. Children living in private fostering arrangements are identified, but assessments are not always subject to rigorous, timely checks to ensure that arrangements are suitable. At the time of the inspection, the vast majority of privately fostered children, although a very small number, did not have an allocated social worker. This means that they are visited by duty social workers and not always as frequently as they need.
14. Young people aged 16 and 17 who are homeless receive good-quality support from a jointly operated service with the youth advice centre. Where appropriate, mediation is used to support young people to return home to live with their families. Where this is not possible, they are provided with suitable accommodation or become looked after following an assessment of their needs.

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

15. Senior leaders in Brighton and Hove have maintained good-quality services for children in care since the last inspection. Social workers and managers are aspirational for the children in their care and demonstrate a strong focus on improving their experiences and outcomes.
16. Comprehensive parenting assessments facilitate decision-making about whether parents are able to meet their children's needs, and they are valued by parents. When it is not possible for children to live with their families safely, social workers and managers take decisive action for children to come into care. The early parenting assessment programme, alongside a range of other assessments and interventions, provides a comprehensive framework of assessment and support to families. These assessments were commended by the family court judge and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service. Detailed assessments are also used to test the suitability and sustainability of arrangements for children returning home, thus ensuring that children in care are effectively supported to return home when this is in their interests.

17. The local authority has worked tenaciously to increase the range of placement options available for children, and they benefit from living in homes that meet their needs well. However, there is a recognised lack of local placements for adolescents with complex needs, and this means that some children are placed at a distance from their friends and family. The local authority is working effectively to increase the number of local placements for these young people. When children are placed at a distance, social workers and managers are effective in ensuring that they receive the support that they need.
18. The large majority of children live with approved carers who provide good-quality care and who support them to access a range of opportunities that enable them to enjoy life. In-house foster carers spoken to during the inspection reflected positively on the good-quality support and training on offer to them in order to support children's placements. When children are placed with friends and family, arrangements are carefully assessed and the vast majority lead to robust and timely decisions regarding the suitability of placements. However, on this inspection inspectors found a very small number of children in unregulated connected carer placements. Senior managers were aware of these placements prior to the inspection and were actively taking steps to resolve some of these court-directed placements.
19. Social workers and managers maintain a strong focus on ensuring that children experience permanence at the earliest opportunity. A wide range of permanence options are carefully considered. Senior managers provide an overview of planning for children through the care planning and tracking forum to ensure that children do not experience unnecessary delay in achieving legal or emotional permanence.
20. The response to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is a strength. Knowledgeable social workers carefully assess the needs of these children. Workers are strong advocates for children and work effectively with other agencies to ensure that children's health, education and well-being needs are well met. Social workers give good consideration to children's cultural and religious needs.
21. Social workers have a good understanding of the children they work with. They build meaningful relationships with children through direct work and regular visiting. Social workers recognise the importance of maintaining children's relationships with their friends and family and promote regular contact with them.
22. Extensive work by senior managers since the last inspection has strengthened the care planning and review process for children in care. Assessments clearly identify and articulate children's needs and views and are updated regularly in response to their changing circumstances. The development of the 'Me and My World' plan and review has brought the child to the centre of planning.

The powerful and clear documents set out the plan in child-friendly language, making complex issues easy to understand. This robust work is making a tangible difference to the care planning process.

23. Independent reviewing officers regularly oversee children's plans and ensure that social workers are progressing actions between reviews. These plans would be strengthened if they consistently contained clearer timescales for delivering key actions. Children are supported to share their views and to participate in decision-making through engagement with advocates. Children benefit from access to independent visitors where required.
24. When children enter care, their health needs are promptly assessed. However, there has been a recent decline in the timeliness of review health assessments and dental checks, which senior managers had identified and are closely monitoring.
25. There is a clear focus on working collaboratively with school leaders to support the educational needs of children in care. The local authority provides support to a number of children placed outside Brighton and Hove. This presents logistical challenges but is well managed. The proportion of care leavers who are in employment, education and training is significantly higher than national comparators. The local authority is working purposefully to increase this further, given its high aspirations for young people.
26. The adoption service is strong. Social workers and managers are ambitious and considered in their decision-making. Children are effectively matched and placed with adopters more quickly than they were previously. There is a wide variety of post-adoption and special guardianship support available to adopters and carers. Adopters spoke positively about the support available to them.
27. The well-established and highly effective care leavers pod supports young people well. Personal advisers and social workers work hard to keep in touch with young people, using a range of approaches, including creative use of social media to communicate with young people. This helps to build relationships of trust and makes a positive difference for young people. For most care leavers, pathway plans are well focused and are used to monitor and drive progress.
28. The local authority is aspirational for care leavers and provides a good range of information and support to help care leavers live safe and fulfilled lives. Educational outcomes for the majority of care leavers are good. There is a drive to ensure that they are supported with good educational and vocational opportunities. This is resulting in more young people in Brighton and Hove entering higher and further education than in national comparators.
29. Young people have good access to a range of housing and living options, and they benefit from effective support to help them maintain their tenancies.

'Staying-put' arrangements for care leavers to remain living with their former foster carers beyond their eighteenth birthdays are readily available, with good uptake across both in-house and independent fostering agency placements.

30. Although the local authority has recruited staff to fill vacancies and to increase the overall capacity of the care leavers team, staff were not yet in post. As a result, caseloads for many personal advisers were high at the time of the inspection. This has resulted in the recording of visits and work undertaken with young people not always being up to date or completed in detail and impedes managers' ability to understand the purpose of the visits and any progress made against young people's plans. A small number of young people's cases were allocated to the manager at the time of inspection, resulting in visits by different duty workers, and making it difficult to build positive relationships.

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

31. The chief executive, director of children's services (DCS) and lead member have a clear and strong focus on improving services and outcomes for children in Brighton and Hove. Supported by strong, cross-party political and corporate support for children's services, they are ensuring that children's needs are prioritised by the council.
32. Since the last inspection in 2015, targeted financial investment has supported a service redesign. The new model of practice has been embedded and is resulting in greater continuity of social work relationships for children and families. Outcomes for children are largely positive and, frequently, risks are reducing, particularly for hard-to-reach, vulnerable adolescents.
33. Senior leaders have a clear understanding of the strengths and areas for further development in their services, informed by a thorough and accurate self-assessment, alongside learning from regular comprehensive quality assurance framework auditing and peer reviews. Areas requiring improvement identified during the inspection were known to senior leaders, and appropriate actions plans are in development, for example the recognised shortfalls in the quality of RHIs commissioned for children who go missing from home or care and the consistency of practice for children in need.
34. Mature, robust relationships with partners, supported by oversight from the local safeguarding children's board and its sub-groups, enable effective multi-agency safeguarding work. The local authority is appropriately creating integrated arrangements with the local clinical commissioning group. This is effectively joining commissioning arrangements to ensure that they bring value and meet the needs of children and families. During this inspection, inspectors consistently saw strong joint work across all services, including

early help, the front door for families, family court work and in work with adolescents.

35. Regular, comprehensive performance reports enable senior leaders to monitor performance against key performance indicators. This is supported by learning from quality assurance audits, ensuring a focus on practice at monthly performance meetings, corporate parenting panel and the Children, Young People and Skills committee.
36. A recent, renewed focus on corporate parenting, supported by strong cross-party political involvement and feedback from young people, is driving improvements. Recent workshops with care leavers to develop the local offer and prioritise the needs of care leavers have included the senior leadership team, chief executive, and lead member, to improve services for young people. Work to ensure the views of younger children are used to inform service developments through the Children in Care Council is being addressed.
37. Under the leadership of the DCS, senior leaders have worked purposefully to build a skilled and stable workforce, with the majority of staff reporting manageable caseloads. As part of the workforce development strategy, a decision not to employ agency staff was introduced and achieved in September 2017. The strategy has been supported by corporate investment in order to allow over-recruitment to the workforce. However, there are a few pressures at some points in the service, which has impacted on social work capacity. At the time of the inspection, a small number of children living in private fostering arrangements and care leavers were not allocated to a worker.
38. The pressures on parts of the service have an impact on some case recording, including recording of supervision and management oversight. At the time of the inspection, inspectors found shortfalls in case recording, meaning that it is not always possible to evidence that all children receive a consistently good service. The weaknesses in some recording makes it hard to gain a good understanding of the child's experience, whether purposeful visiting takes place or to monitor children's progress to ensure that their outcomes are improving. However, when discussing children's individual cases with social workers, it was evident that they had a thorough understanding of each case and that plans were in place to improve outcomes for children. The local authority is aware of the weaknesses in recording and has worked on specific areas such as improved recording of chronologies and genograms. Procurement of a new children's recording system to support improvements is appropriately in place for later this year.
39. Social workers' morale is high, and workers spoken to as part of the inspection told inspectors that they enjoy working in Brighton and Hove.



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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

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

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