

Inspection of Bromley local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 13 to 17 November 2023

Lead inspector: Claire Beckingham, His 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	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding

Children in the London Borough of Bromley receive exceptionally strong services. Leaders have continued to strengthen and further enhance practice since the previous inspection in 2018. Impressive strategic and operational leadership, allied with strong corporate and political commitment, has led to a shared vision and momentum for children's services. This has gained the confidence and commitment of key partners, and there is a real appetite for shared solutions in the delivery of services.

Senior leaders regularly and meaningfully engage with children, families and partners. Participation and feedback, a strong performance information infrastructure and a well-established and extensive audit programme underpin service delivery and enable leaders to maintain a clear line of sight over children's experiences. Leaders have an accurate understanding of strengths and weaknesses. They have fully addressed the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection, turning these now into areas of strength. They know where to focus their attention and have plans already in place to continue to improve practice.

What needs to improve?

- The continued strengthening of practice for children experiencing increasing risks that may lead to the pre-proceedings stage of the public law outline.

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

1. Impressive family help services intervene at the right time to improve children's circumstances. Experienced and skilful early help practitioners confidently assess need and empower families to improve their relationships and lives. Excellent early help services are carefully targeted to help families with a wide range of needs. Parental consent and the thresholds for intervention are well understood by practitioners and partners. Help is offered at the least intrusive level.
2. The children and families hub is highly effective. Working as an integrated multi-agency team, professionals share information appropriately and accurately assess the help that families need. Managers have meticulous oversight of work coming into the hub and provide detailed, specific directions. Responses are child-centred and prompt and focus on what needs to happen to reduce risks. The quality of referrals from education, police and healthcare professionals is strong, reflecting the quality of joint working in the borough.
3. The emergency duty service provides an effective and timely response and communicates well with day services.
4. When there are contacts about domestic abuse, practitioners incorporate current and historical information into their assessments. Independent domestic abuse advisers provide an impressive amount of information about previous support offered to families. Their expertise, and their understanding of the severity, frequency and impact of domestic abuse, enable the provision of timely, effective support to families in order to safeguard children.
5. Social workers undertake very high-quality, analytical and thoughtful assessments. They thoroughly address family functioning and clearly articulate risks, vulnerabilities and strengths. Children do not have to wait for assessments to be completed to receive the services they need. Social workers undertake safety planning at the earliest opportunity to enable children to be protected from harm. Interim arrangements are agreed with partner agencies, parents, and, where appropriate, children themselves, empowering families to participate in plans about their lives. Issues relating to diversity and culture are well understood. Social workers demonstrate great curiosity about families' worlds and use the knowledge they gain to inform the next steps.
6. Social workers are successful in helping children and are compassionate in their work with parents. Children are seen regularly and alone, and their views are captured through skilled and sensitive direct work. Children phone, text and

email their social workers. They are encouraged to participate actively in plans for their well-being and safety. Sensitive intervention aids positive working relationships between professional and family networks, helping to safeguard children.

7. Professionals take appropriate action when risks to children increase. Strategy meetings are well attended by relevant partners, whose thoroughly recorded contributions inform risk assessment and the next steps. In most cases, strategy meetings are timely, and actions are prompt and decisive to keep children safer. When children become subject to child protection plans, regular core group meetings are well attended by multi-agency professionals, who share information about children's circumstances and provide comprehensive support to children and their families. This reduces risk and improves children's welfare in most cases. Child-in-need and child protection plans are comprehensive and consistently provide for contingency planning.
8. Targeted early intervention and edge-of-care work are successfully diverting children from the need for care, pre-proceedings and court proceedings, helping children to remain with their families. Decisions to escalate children's cases to pre-proceedings when their experiences are not improving are appropriate. However, the language in letters before proceedings is not easy enough for all parents they are written for to understand the concerns. For a small number of children, assessments are completed at child-in-need and child protection stages but are repeated through pre-proceedings. This slows intervention and makes it more difficult to divert these children from proceedings.
9. Social workers in the disabled children's service respond effectively to children's complex needs and vulnerabilities. Direct work is creative. Workers use toys and games, entering the child's world to engage with them in play. This helps them to understand the child's lived experience and their interaction with parents. When disabled children are nonverbal, observations of their relationships and interactions with their parents, sisters and brothers and professionals are used to inform assessments, plans, support and intervention.
10. Children who are missing, experiencing exploitation or at risk of extra-familial harm receive targeted and highly individualised support. High-quality return home interviews lead to robust and appropriate plans that contain recommendations to improve children's safety. A broad range of community, healthcare and police activities are brokered into the support that is offered to children and their families, helping to reduce risk. Social workers make appropriate referrals to the National Referral Mechanism. Senior leaders are well sighted on the most vulnerable children through the regular and effective Multi-Agency Child Exploitation (MACE) panel and the Missing, Exploitation and Gang Affiliation (MEGA) panel, where tightly managed multi-agency plans help ensure that risks to children are reduced and their lives improve.

11. Arrangements to support and safeguard privately fostered children in Bromley are robust. Children are seen alone by social workers, who take time to get to know them, take account of their diverse needs and provide good support to carers. The local authority has taken extensive action internally and externally to raise awareness about private fostering. This has led to an increase in referrals, enquiries and children identified as living in private fostering arrangements.
12. All children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless receive an excellent service. Their needs are quickly assessed through a clear homelessness pathway assessment. Children are central to decision-making and are fully informed of their rights and entitlements. Children are accommodated when necessary, and this is proactively sought for children where there are safeguarding concerns. Semi-independent accommodation is commissioned by the council's housing service when children do not wish to be accommodated, and these children are supported by social workers as children in need. They are helped to access education and work and, at 18 years old, they are awarded priority status for housing.
13. Local authority designated officer arrangements in Bromley are effective. Decisions on consultation and referral thresholds are timely, with well-recorded rationales. Delays in respect of criminal matters are escalated to senior leaders.
14. Effective multi-agency working ensures that there is a timely response when risks are identified for children who are electively home educated. Children who are missing education are identified, reviewed and followed up appropriately. Strong partnership working and individualised approaches enable children who have complex backgrounds and education histories to access and sustain suitable education placements. Professionals are mindful of children's social and emotional needs, as well as their academic needs. They persist when it seems that education placements are either full or not suitable, appropriately challenging the decisions of others in the best interests of children. Keeping the most vulnerable children in education is helping to protect them from harm.

The experiences and progress of children in care: outstanding

15. Children in Bromley's care receive excellent support and make good progress in their lives. Social workers have caseloads that enable them to spend time with children, building trusting relationships. Most children benefit from having consistent social workers over time. Workers know that the quality of relationships that children have is key to good outcomes. They invest time, energy and enjoyment in the children they support. They work effectively with children's families, carers and partners to establish a caring network around each child. A foundation of trust and respect for parents helps to safeguard children. Social workers help parents to rebuild relationships with their children.
16. Decisions for children to come into care are appropriate and based on an accurate assessment of the risks that they face. Extensive efforts are made to

keep children safely within their families, but the right decisions are made when the need for alternative care arises. Entry to care is properly planned for most children, enabling them to settle with suitable, well-prepared carers. For a small number of children exposed to neglectful parenting, the decision for them to come into care could have been taken sooner.

17. Once children are in care, effective plans and services are mobilised quickly to establish clear placement plans for them, provide initial health assessments for them and ensure that independent reviewing officers (IROs) are appointed to oversee their progress.
18. Senior leaders, team managers and frontline workers fully understand children's need for permanence. Permanence planning is timely, which swiftly secures stability for children. Senior oversight of children's permanence plans is impressive. There is appropriate consideration of adoption at early permanence discussions. Adoption is considered for all children where this might best meet their needs.
19. Children live in safe, stable, good-quality placements that meet their needs. When children experience instability, the local authority uses a range of resources to prevent breakdowns. When a change of placement is appropriate, social workers plan well and help children understand what is happening and where they are going. Workers undertake sensitive and skilled work, helping children to understand their experiences and journey in care. A commissioned app, available to carers, children and social work staff, is helping children to build memories about important people and events in their lives.
20. Children's voices, views and wishes are clearly captured in records of visits and through creative direct work, helping the family and professional network to understand what children want in their lives. Direct work, child engagement and life-story work are strengths, and children's achievements are celebrated.
21. Children's care plans are comprehensive. They capture children's needs and set out how these will be met. They identify the range of support that is needed to help them do their best in education, pursue their interests and spend time with friends and family. Children's time with their families is skilfully promoted. The recently strengthened IRO service carries out statutory reviews of children's plans within the required timescale, making revisions where appropriate. Leaders have recognised that the return to in-person reviews following the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions has taken too long. Robust, recent action has now appropriately re-established in-person meetings with IROs.
22. Children's individual identities are recognised as being central to their experiences. Workers' understanding of individual needs is evident in children's plans. Independent visitors are an important additional source of support for children.

23. Decisions for children to return to their families are based on thorough assessments that incorporate children's views and the input of other agencies. Transitions are carefully planned in consultation with children and parents, helping children return successfully to their families. Transitions are carefully monitored. Care orders are revoked in a timely manner.
24. Disabled children are supported by social workers who are knowledgeable and passionate and know them well. Their care plans progress at pace and they live in stable and well-matched placements where their individual needs are understood and met by their foster carers. Children are visited in accordance with their needs. Social workers use their skills and tools to engage with children and understand their communication.
25. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are supported in suitable accommodation where they have ready access to their cultural communities.
26. Practitioners are aware of emerging risks and concerns that children face. They take action to support children who are experiencing difficulties at home, at school or in their communities. When there are significant concerns about children's safety, for example a risk of criminal exploitation, or if disabilities mean that they need safety restrictions, deprivation of liberty orders are sometimes used for short periods to ensure that children receive sufficient supervision and care to protect them.
27. A dedicated healthcare team for children in care ensures that health assessments and strengths and difficulties questionnaires are completed on time and used well. Children's healthcare needs are identified, and appropriate services are arranged. The in-house THRIVE service provides effective therapeutic support for children and their carers, helping to offset long waiting times to access specialist child and adolescent mental health services.
28. The dynamic virtual school provides strong support to children and practitioners. Personal education plans (PEPs) place the child at the centre of support, and an increasing number of children chair their own PEP meetings. Additional and valuable support for education is provided, for example through holiday tuition provided online to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and in the provision of laptops. Children in care in Bromley achieve well in school, and their attendance is good and improving.
29. Bromley has had to place a very small number of children in unregistered children's homes. Where the authority has determined that these children's needs are largely being met, it is supporting the provider to register with Ofsted. Detailed risk assessments are completed by children's social workers and signed off by an assistant director. More frequent visits take place to oversee the care that these children receive. Senior leaders know Bromley needs more carers for parent and child placements and specialist placements, and more carers with the skills to meet the needs of vulnerable adolescents and children with challenging behaviour. The authority is making progress on a

recruitment strategy that is aimed at achieving sufficient placement provision and increasing the diversity and skills of carers.

30. Effective recruitment, assessment, training and support of foster carers, adopters and kinship carers are helping children settle in their homes, where they are well cared for. Workers consider children's wide-ranging needs well when matching them with carers.
31. Adoption is thoughtfully and carefully considered. Effective collaboration and communication with the regional adoption agency (Coram Ambitious for Adoption) at the earliest opportunity help to ensure that the right decisions are made within children's timeframes. Robust scrutiny and oversight are applied by the adoption panel, keeping children's best interests at the forefront of key decision-making. Careful consideration is given to post-adoption support, and staff ensure that families understand their entitlement to access support when needed.
32. Bromley's Living in Care Council helps children and care leavers to be confident about their rights. It provides good opportunities for children to speak to leaders and partners at the corporate parenting board, where they influence decisions and help shape services. Children in care and care leavers feel heard. When inspectors asked whether children had any messages they wanted relayed to leaders, they confidently told inspectors: 'We'll tell them ourselves.'

The experiences and progress of care leavers: outstanding

33. Children in care in Bromley start their transition to the leaving care service early so that they have sufficient time to develop trusting relationships with their young person's adviser (YPA), Bromley's personal advisers, before they leave care. This helps care leavers understand what help and support will be available to them as they become adults.
34. Care leavers benefit from compassionate and sensitive YPAs, who are thoughtful and who support them to achieve their potential. They celebrate care leavers' achievements, big and small, and build their confidence. YPAs are ambitious for young people. They advocate strongly on their behalf and help them secure support and services in line with their needs and best interests.
35. YPAs have manageable caseloads that enable them to undertake meaningful work with care leavers. They have frequent contact with care leavers, sending warm messages between visits that demonstrate the strength of the relationships they build with care leavers. These messages cover everything from sharing resources to celebrating important occasions or simply chatting about television programmes. Tenacious and persistent work by YPAs to build relationships with them encourages care leavers to stay in touch.
36. Bromley's Our House provides opportunities for care leavers to meet with their peers, YPAs and partner agencies, who offer advice and support about finances

and housing options. The house is a creative hub that promotes a collaborative environment in which young people feel cared for and safe.

37. Care leavers are widely consulted through the Living in Care Council and they regularly attend the corporate parenting board to present their priorities for members to progress with senior leaders. Care leavers have a meaningful voice and impact on the work of the local authority. Their experiences, opinions and feedback directly influence service delivery. YPAs listen to young people. Their views inform practice. Confident YPAs and care leavers are vocal in sharing their insights with leaders.
38. Care leavers' healthcare needs are well considered, and actions to improve their health are recorded in their pathway plans. Care leavers have access to their health histories. Gym memberships, if required, are fully funded by the local authority to promote good physical and mental health.
39. YPAs have a good understanding of care leavers' vulnerabilities and the impact of trauma and adverse life experiences on their health and well-being. A tenacious mental health practitioner provides persistent advocacy to help young people access appropriate mental health services and psychiatric care. Young people can access specialist mental health support, including through group therapy. This support creates an environment for more stable mental health, helping care leavers to develop coping strategies, regulate their emotions, retain employment and attend college.
40. Bromley's local offer for care leavers is a strength. A well-developed website illustrates the broad range of practical and emotional support available to assist young people in their transition to adulthood. Care leavers know their entitlements, which are captured well in their pathway plans. Support funds, bursaries, financial literacy skills training, and a financial adviser and well-being adviser in the team all help care leavers to manage their money and accommodation.
41. Children's social care has a very strong relationship with housing services. Care leavers have priority status for housing, which they often choose themselves, going on to manage their tenancies successfully. Priority housing remains available to care leavers who are leaving custody, including those aged over 25 years. YPAs are knowledgeable about the range of services and support available, whether locally or out of the area. Joint visits are carried out with housing providers. In addition, Bromley 'young inspectors' are paid to provide feedback to leaders on the quality and suitability of housing provision. Care leavers told inspectors that they felt safe where they live.
42. Care leavers benefit from an independence training programme that is delivered jointly with other agencies. Input from housing professionals, Department for Work and Pensions staff and mental health professionals helps inform young people about the longer term support available. This supports them to make informed choices about accommodation and training, and to

access emotional and mental health support when they need it. YPAs help care leavers access legal advice to challenge housing providers on repairs to their properties.

43. Comprehensive pathway plans are co-produced with care leavers, providing information about their needs and entitlements, and practical information about their finances. Plans include contributions from young people. These plans are reviewed regularly and amended to reflect new and emerging needs.
44. YPAs provide effective support for vulnerable care leavers who are at risk of exploitation. They know young people well, maintain up-to-date case summaries that outline risks and put support in place to increase their safety. The MEGA panel also reviews young people up to the age of 25, bringing together multi-agency partners to explore and analyse risks and vulnerabilities associated with contextual safeguarding.
45. Care leavers in custody receive ongoing visits, contact and good support from YPAs, who offer encouragement, advocacy and emotional support.
46. Reducing the risk of care leavers not engaging in education, employment and training is a key priority. Some care leavers repeatedly enter education, employment and training provision that subsequently breaks down. YPAs help young people to develop their skills and confidence and so sustain their engagement. The leaving care panel brings together a broad range of professional advice, guidance and support to enable care leavers to gain and sustain meaningful progress in education, employment and training. Care leavers are supported to attend their panel meetings to ensure that their voice is heard and their aspirations are taken fully into account. Leaders demonstrate their commitment through providing employment, paid work experience and apprenticeship opportunities for care leavers in the local authority.
47. Care leavers who are parents receive excellent support. A dedicated care leavers parent group helps develop parenting skills and provides an important support network. Young people can access additional early help services through local community centres. Care leavers' records include information about the development and well-being of their children, reflecting the authority's family-first approach.
48. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people experience the same high quality of services as other Bromley care leavers. Their identity needs are well considered. They benefit from suitable accommodation and are supported to reach their goals.
49. Most care leavers transfer to the leaving care team with their important identification documents. This helps to empower care leavers and gives them more control and independence as they move into adulthood.
50. Decisions about any support needed beyond age 21 are made in consultation with young people. Those who need or want ongoing help receive it. The

service maintains written contact with care leavers who are no longer receiving services. They are welcomed back if they return for support.

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

51. Children in Bromley benefit from effective, high-quality services secured by a stable leadership team with a shared and ambitious vision for their future. From a strong starting point at the inspection in 2018, the quality and impact of practice have been maintained and built on. Reaching this level of consistency across children's services is an impressive achievement.
52. The lead member and the chief executive receive regular, high-quality, detailed data and practice reports that aid their understanding of the quality of social work practice. This understanding is strengthened through regular meetings with children and young people. There is effective communication between the chief executive and the director of children's services (DCS). The chief executive understands the role and challenges facing a DCS very well. He holds the DCS to account while providing support and remaining a strong advocate for children and for children's services. An environment of high support and high challenge is echoed at every level, from YPAs, social workers and operational managers, through the senior leadership team, and outwards to families and partners and, like a golden thread, back again.
53. Leaders have high aspirations for children and have gained the confidence of staff and partners. They have developed strong and mature relationships with key partners. There is a well-embedded understanding at all levels of the leadership team about the importance of these relationships, especially in the context of complexity and pressure in public services. Partners view the local authority as child-centred and responsive. Trust in the quality of services promotes a collective will to continually improve support for children. This has allowed the local authority to develop a coherent, multi-agency response to emerging needs and rising demand. Leaders have successfully strengthened early help services. They have developed a well-coordinated, multi-agency response that safeguards children who are at risk of extra-familial harm. Bromley is considered by the judiciary to be a trail-blazing borough and a strong participant in the local family justice board, where leaders contribute to solutions and input resources.
54. Senior leaders are champions for children, both in the local area and in the wider context of London. Children's services benefit from strong political support and a commitment that is evident in the council's financial investment and growth in services for vulnerable children. Innovative and creative services are helping children to make progress and to achieve a greater level of well-being. Investment in analytics and quality assurance tools has enabled Bromley to develop a sophisticated and accurate suite of data that informs its strategic priorities.

55. Bromley invites external scrutiny and shares its practice with others. There is a strong performance culture throughout the service. Accurate performance information, assurance reviews and extensive audit activity provide operational managers and leaders with a clear understanding of quality across the organisation. The authority's self-evaluation is strikingly accurate. Leaders know their services well and are confident in identifying where they can further strengthen practice.
56. Management oversight of children's progress is exceptionally strong and highly consistent across the service. This is supplemented by regular, high-quality supervision and practice reflection sessions, which practitioners greatly value. Managers know children well and understand their experiences. This means their support and direction for practitioners are all the more effective. The shared ownership of risks empowers social workers to be bold in their practice.
57. Practitioners have good access to training and development opportunities and are able to describe easily how these have improved their practice. Leaders are developing new career pathways, including the use of flexible working to support training, such as for practice teaching. Social workers describe helpful managers who support their individual career ambitions. Managers develop professional development plans with practitioners that increase their knowledge and skills.
58. Leaders have focused on building a stable workforce despite challenging recruitment conditions in Outer London. Services are staffed by a solid proportion of permanent social workers and managers. Most children benefit from consistency of social worker. Agency staff in the workforce have been in Bromley for a sustained period of time. Some are persuaded to become permanent employees. Leaders have created an environment where outstanding practice is flourishing and celebrated. Their commitment to proportionate caseloads, Bromley's 'caseload promise', means that social workers have time to develop meaningful relationships with children and families and carry out high-quality work of which they are rightly proud. Social workers light up when talking about their children.
59. Finally, staff enjoy working in Bromley. They speak of a highly visible and responsive leadership team and praise their operational managers, heads of practice, assistant directors and other leaders. They know their leaders, they appreciate their leaders and they feel appreciated in return. Bromley's chosen relational practice model is echoed in internal relationships. It is important to note the sense of care and kindness that inspectors found exists for staff.

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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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