

Inspection of Birmingham City Council local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 20 February to 3 March 2023

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	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Since the last inspection in 2018, much progress has been made by Birmingham City Council and Birmingham Children's Trust in improving the experiences and outcomes of their children. Children are now safeguarded through effective 'front door' arrangements, thorough child protection assessments and a strong response to safeguarding children at risk of exploitation. Children are supported at an early stage to remain in their families where possible. When intervention is required to protect children, it is proportionate to risk and need. When children need to come into care, their needs are met well in appropriate placements. Some children spend too long in stable placements awaiting the appropriate change in legal status to secure their permanence. Care-experienced young people benefit from a strong corporate commitment and ambition to enable them to fulfil their potential in life. Personal advisers develop supportive and encouraging relationships with young people, though for some, the earlier involvement of a personal adviser would help in their preparation for adulthood. Children in care and care-experienced young people are genuinely listened to and actively engaged in recruitment, staff training and service development. Despite significant trust investment and partnership engagement, response to domestic abuse is not proportionate to demand in the city.

Effective performance reporting and quality assurance arrangements help to ensure that leaders have a clear understanding of emerging themes and trends in practice, to which they quickly respond. Good recognition of the diversity of the population is evident throughout the overall strategic ambitions for the city and is reflected in services and support for children and families.

What needs to improve?

- The effectiveness of the response to domestic abuse.
- Earlier pre-birth assessments to support early permanence planning, and timely action to progress permanence plans for children in stable placements through changes to legal status.
- Earlier engagement of personal advisers for children leaving care.
- Consistency of written plans.

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

1. Since the inspection in 2018, Birmingham Children's Trust and partners have developed and implemented strong early help services for children and families. Children and families benefit from an effective early help offer, with services that support them at the lowest level of intervention. Children receive a timely and thorough assessment of their needs that leads to effective plans that improve their experiences.
2. Concerns about children who need help and protection receive a timely and effective response from the Children's Advice and Support Service (CASS). Clear management oversight guides workers as to immediate actions. When there are safeguarding concerns, parental consent is appropriately dispensed with. Family history and targeted safeguarding checks inform decisions on next steps. Managers mostly apply the right thresholds, with timely progression to the appropriate service, with a clear rationale for intervention. However, the quality of information from education does not always contribute effectively to decision-making in CASS. Leaders have responded during the inspection by committing additional education resources.
3. Many children who experience incidents of domestic abuse through parental conflict are triaged by the police acting as a single agency, before being referred to social care. Police make decisions on next steps without full consideration of partners' information. This means that the trust cannot be assured that the needs and risks for children experiencing domestic abuse are fully understood. During the inspection, leaders have put in quality assurance measures in response to this.

4. The emergency duty service responds to children's needs in a timely and proportionate way. The service interacts and aligns with daytime and weekend services, with effective handover arrangements to daytime services.
5. When children are identified as being at risk of harm, there is an effective response through timely child protection strategy meetings, which are overseen well by managers and result in clear actions. An education representative or sufficient information from schools is not routinely available, resulting in decisions being made without full information. Leaders have acknowledged this and taken action to ensure that appropriate representation and information are now available.
6. Child protection assessments provide a clear analysis of risks. Children are seen quickly when risks are identified. Views of children, parents and professionals are sought to inform assessments and, as a result, child protection enquiries are thorough and lead to children receiving the right level of support.
7. Children and families benefit from the timely allocation of social workers, who commence assessments promptly. The views of children and adults are threaded throughout the assessment. Strengths and protective factors are clearly identified and inform analysis and appropriate decision-making. Management oversight consistently informs next steps.
8. The threshold to proceed to initial child protection conferences is appropriately applied. Most conferences include key agencies and have a balanced focus on risks and strengths.
9. The quality of child protection and child in need plans is inconsistent. When they are stronger, written plans consider children's needs well and include their wishes and feelings. However, the inconsistent recording of the plans makes it difficult to understand how progress is monitored, as actions are not always timebound. Families would find it difficult to follow some plans without support. Safety planning is routinely considered but is inconsistently recorded and is sometimes ambiguous, and therefore difficult for families to understand.
10. Core groups and child in need meetings are held regularly and review progress against children's plans. For most meetings, the relevant professionals attend and contribute to effective decision-making. Family group conferences are routinely held and result in plans that are effective and supportive, helping children to remain in their families.
11. For a small number of children suffering long-term neglect, social work visits and management oversight are less impactful, and children remain in neglectful situations for too long. Leaders have recognised this and have implemented a new neglect strategy in response. It is too soon to see the impact of this.

12. The quality of practice and management oversight for progressing children through the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline (PLO) has improved since the last inspection. However, some children experience drift and delay in how quickly their plans are progressed, and actions often remain outstanding for too long. Senior leaders have recognised the shortfalls in pre-proceedings practice and have strengthened the service with additional resources and improved monitoring systems. However, this has not yet had a demonstrable and consistent impact for all children.
13. For unborn children who are at high risk of coming into care, planning for permanence does not routinely start at the earliest opportunity. Pre-birth assessments are of good quality but are not always commenced in a timely way, leading to delay in securing the right legal framework to protect children. Some babies are placed in foster care rather than being matched with early permanence placements. This means that some babies are not always provided with stability and security at the earliest opportunity.
14. Social workers know their children well and develop strong relationships. Children are regularly seen in line with presenting needs. Children's experiences, diversity and cultural needs are explored through creative direct work as well as meaningful conversations to inform interventions.
15. Disabled children who receive help and protection mostly receive an effective service. Social workers and staff from partner agencies understand the needs and risks of these children. Assessments and plans are detailed and purposeful, with the views of children and families consistently recorded. Children's plans are progressed through meetings that are well attended by partner agencies. Some social workers are trained in alternative methods of communication so they can confidently connect with disabled children and ensure that their wishes and feelings are gathered during visits.
16. Once children are identified as being in a private fostering arrangement, they are visited and assessed in a timely way. Children's views are consistently heard, and social workers ensure that they are safe and settled where they live.
17. When children aged 16 or 17 present as homeless, they are quickly responded to by workers from the homelessness team. A clear and effective protocol between advisory services, housing and social care provides an immediate response to children, ensuring that initial safeguarding issues are addressed. While some children become looked after, it is not clearly recorded that all are fully informed of their accommodation rights.
18. Children who are at risk of criminal and sexual exploitation are supported effectively through a specialist team, EmpowerU. Daily multi-agency meetings ensure that immediate steps are taken to address risk. When children are assessed as at high risk, disruption and child protection strategy meetings are quickly held and actions are identified to try to mitigate risks. Safety plans and

risk assessments are updated regularly, with interventions having a positive impact on children and reducing risks. When children go missing, social workers in EmpowerU review episodes of going missing and conduct return home interviews to engage children in understanding risk factors.

19. There are effective systems in place to check that pupils' welfare is safeguarded. Pupils who are missing from school are tracked and agencies share concerns at the earliest opportunity. However, at times, the range of recording systems can get in the way of rapid understanding of a child's experience.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

20. Children enter care in a timely manner and when it is in their interests to do so. Decisions for children to come into care are appropriately overseen by a senior manager. There is a clear rationale and children reviewing their records would understand why decisions were made about them.
21. Children's identity needs are well considered when seeking an appropriate placement match. Careful consideration is given to sibling relationships, with effective together or apart assessments helping to determine appropriate placement needs. This enables children to live with their brothers and sisters when it is in their best interests.
22. Children are encouraged and supported to keep in touch with important people in their lives. Family-time arrangements are in line with children's needs. Social workers reassess arrangements when circumstances change, or children express views of not wishing to see parents.
23. Thorough court social work assessments are reducing the need for the number of expert and independent social worker assessments. This is contributing to improved timescales and, as a result, decisions about children's long-term plans are made sooner.
24. Most care plans are appropriate and in line with children's needs. They are reviewed effectively by independent reviewing officers and children are encouraged and assisted to attend their review. Children's wishes and feelings are well considered and integrated into care plans, for example, their wishes around family time.
25. Children leave care to return to their families when it is right to do so. Timely and purposeful parenting assessments are undertaken to ensure that it is safe for the child to return home. This allows children to be supported to live with their families whenever this is possible and in their best interests.
26. Very few children in care are placed at a distance from their local area. Where this is the case, children are mainly in very stable long-term placements with

connected carers. These children progress well in the care of their wider families.

27. For many children in care who live with their parents or with connected carers, there are delays in progressing special guardianship applications and the discharge of care orders, sometimes many years after it is clear that these are stable long-term placements. There is a lack of effective management review of these children to ensure that the drift and delay is addressed. This means that some children do not have the opportunity for legal permanence when the time is right for them and, in some circumstances, children remain subject to statutory social work intervention for longer than is necessary.
28. For children who are placed at home with their parents on care orders, parenting assessments are not routinely reviewed and updated to ensure that their care arrangements remain appropriate and continue to meet their needs.
29. Children in care benefit from stable relationships with their social workers, who visit them regularly and in line with their needs. Children benefit from age-appropriate direct work, which helps workers to gain their views and helps children understand their family history and experiences. Children's voices are evident in case recordings and the child's wishes are acted on when appropriate.
30. There are several forums and panels for children and young people to participate and engage with the corporate parenting board and senior leaders. The voice of children and young people is well embedded, influencing wider practice and service development. For example, consultation with young people on what makes a good and stable relationship has influenced the trust's practice model and standards.
31. When children go missing from care, there is an effective response and pertinent information is shared. However, a small number of children are not offered timely return home interviews to ensure that risks are understood at the earliest opportunity.
32. Children's physical, emotional and mental health needs are well considered and most children in care make progress in their health and development. When children have additional needs, they are supported through prompt referrals to the therapeutic emotional support service (TESS), ensuring that the earliest interventions needed by children are offered promptly.
33. The virtual school (VS) has established and embedded effective links with schools, other council departments and a wide range of external partners. Care plans and personal education plans are well integrated. This means that those with oversight of any child work together very effectively to ensure that children can make good progress. Children in care are well supported by the VS for their next steps at all transition points.

34. Most children in care are living in appropriate homes that meet their assessed needs and where they are making progress. Most children benefit from stable placements. When there are difficulties between children and carers, care planning meetings are held and support is put in place to try to avoid placement breakdowns and children having to move.
35. A small number of children live with connected carers who are meeting children's needs but are not approved by fostering panel for reasons relating to concerns about their health, vulnerabilities or outstanding police or health checks. There is a lack of risk assessment and management oversight to ensure that children remain safe and supported in these arrangements.
36. There are a small number of children with complex needs in unregistered children's homes. The trust encourages providers to register with Ofsted, with whom they maintain routine dialogue on the progress of registrations. While concurrent searches take place, senior leaders and commissioning services seek to assure themselves that children's needs are met, through a high level of oversight of these placements.
37. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) are provided with suitable accommodation in a timely way. Social workers ensure that their immediate care and cultural needs are met. Children's health needs are quickly addressed through the New to the Country Clinic and children are offered support with their emotional well-being. Access to education is a priority, with many children attending English language courses. Children have access to an interpreter and are supported to get legal advice to help them understand their rights as a child in care and asylum seeker.
38. Managers have a good overview of the recruitment of mainstream foster carers and continue to recruit to offset the number of resignations. The trust is on target to recruit 30 mainstream foster carers this year. However, there has still been a decrease in mainstream foster placements available to children overall in this timescale.
39. Adopters are well prepared by the agency for the challenges that adoptive parenting can bring. Well-considered matching of children to their future families takes place in conjunction with the children's social workers. Adopters meet their children in a way that is focused on the needs of the child. Careful planning enables them to build meaningful connections with their children. This has resulted in few adoption breakdowns for children.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

40. Care-experienced young people benefit from personal advisers (PAs) who make time to develop strong and supportive relationships with their young people, understanding their lived experiences and their needs.

41. However, for most young people, PAs are not allocated soon enough, until close to their 18th birthday. Young people do not have access to the specialist expertise of the PA early enough to support early independence preparation. Once allocated to PAs, young people receive support to develop their independence skills.
42. Most young people have good access to their health records, are registered with a GP and can access health services as required. Those who need it are supported by TESS with emotional well-being and mental health needs until age 25. Young people's emotional well-being is routinely held in mind by PAs, who undertake skilled direct work where the young person is not ready to engage with other services. Specialist support is available for those with additional needs, such as the 'breaking the cycle' service for pregnant care leavers.
43. The local offer for care-experienced young people is comprehensive and is readily available in a range of formats. Care-experienced young people are familiar with the offer and appreciate the range of support it provides. PAs routinely share the offer and discuss it with young people but are always conscious of the need to ensure that young people fully understand their options and make well-informed choices.
44. Care-experienced young people are actively involved in a range of events, conferences and forums. These are a regular forum for providing information and exploring opportunities, but also for care experienced young people to showcase their achievements, meet up with others and feel valued.
45. Care-experienced young people who are parents feel particularly involved in contributing their voice. They feel that what they say is listened to and makes a difference, such as the development of a pregnancy pathway. They value participation opportunities as social events and feel less isolated as a result. They feel connected to senior leaders and feel part of a large family.
46. Accommodation options for young people are carefully considered with the young person's input and in their best interests. The majority are in suitable accommodation. However, for some young people as they turn 18, planning has not been effective in securing the right accommodation and a small number have had to move to placements less suitable in meeting their needs.
47. Care-experienced young people have up-to-date pathway assessments and plans that identify their needs and risks, which have actions that focus on improving the young person's outcomes. PAs are aspirational for their young people, encouraging them to set their goals high and helping them to try and achieve them.
48. Care-experienced young people benefit from PAs who have a good understanding of the risks they face and work with a range of agencies to

increase safety and reduce risk. Cultural dimensions to risk are understood, for example risk of trafficking and of forced marriage.

49. Most young people are in appropriate education, employment or training and they have longer-term aims and job ambitions they are working towards. Many benefit from the increasing range of apprenticeship opportunities open to them in the council, the trust and the local business sector, developing skills and helping them into permanent employment. PAs maintain dialogue with young people who are not in education, employment or training and proactively explore options with them, engaging other services as appropriate.
50. When unaccompanied asylum-seeker children leave care, they are well supported to access appropriate accommodation and employment, and to pursue their religious and cultural needs and legal rights.

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

51. There are clear and effective governance arrangements between the council and the trust. The appointment of an experienced and permanent director of children's services (DCS) to the council in November 2021 has brought focus to improving those children's services delivered by the council. The chief executive and director of practice in the trust have a clear understanding of the main challenges they face and are working well with the DCS in meeting these. The trust has made strong progress in most areas which required improvement at the last inspection, and pace has been sustained through the pandemic and beyond. Political leaders give great priority to children in Birmingham. Despite the financial pressures the council faces, investment in strengthening services in response to increased demand is a continuing commitment.
52. There has been a positive shift in the quality and impact of partnership working between the council and the trust, along with other key strategic allies. This is particularly evident in the implementation of the early help strategy, with many more families receiving effective help at the right time. The response to exploitation through the EmpowerU service is a real strength.
53. Senior management oversight and arrangements to track progress of children's early permanence are not sufficiently effective. Legal oversight of some children escalated into the pre-proceedings stage of the PLO is not sought early enough to prevent drift and delay. Equally, too many children experience delay in the discharge of orders when successfully placed with their parents. During this inspection, leaders have acknowledged these issues and are making organisational and strategic changes aimed at ensuring greater focus and improved outcomes for these children.
54. The local authority and the trust have sought to develop the partnership response to the impact of domestic abuse on children and families. However,

this remains under-resourced to respond effectively to the increasing level of demand. Despite investment in several additional services and dedicated management oversight, the absence of important partner agencies in the initial triaging process and the absence of perpetrator programmes for high-risk offenders are known concerns for the trust. They are continuing to escalate their concerns about the impact of this gap in provision on the safeguarding of children.

55. The commitment to corporate parenting is a strength in Birmingham. A comprehensive work plan is overseen by an effective corporate parenting board. There are a wide range of forums and panels for young people to participate in, informing the ambitious and aspirational corporate parenting strategy.
56. Advocacy and mentoring arrangements for children and care-experienced young people are thorough and well promoted. This has helped to improve the quality and impact of the child's voice, for example in children in care reviews and family group conferences.
57. Leaders have an informed analysis of the placement needs of children in care and are responding effectively to the challenges in providing sufficient placements. Leaders adapt to new emerging issues promptly. For example, the unexpected significant increase in UASC numbers has been responded to effectively through the timely commissioning of relevant services.
58. The trust is developing a strong learning culture. The social work academy supports and trains a large cohort of newly qualified staff effectively. Staff have readily available access to appropriate training relevant to their areas of practice.
59. A well-embedded performance framework helps leaders to identify and respond to granular issues and trends in practice. Team managers are provided with detailed performance reports to help them ensure compliance with statutory work. Leaders are aware that the case recording system used in the trust needs further improvement to help improve data quality and enhance reporting.
60. Quality assurance arrangements are effective. Quarterly evaluations of practice inform training and service development. This is resulting in continually improving practice and services to children and families. Extensive auditing activity takes place, although more could be done to track the completion of recommended actions, demonstrating the impact on outcomes for individual children.
61. Most social workers have manageable caseloads, and all are very positive about working for the trust, feeling respected and valued by leaders. The positive organisational culture established in the trust is enabling the incremental development of a relationship-based, trauma-informed practice model to

permeate through the workforce. Supervision is held regularly, although it is not consistently effective in progressing children's plans and addressing drift.

62. Strengthening and stabilising the workforce is a priority for leaders in Birmingham. There is a comprehensive workforce development strategy in place. Internal structural changes have been made in the trust to maximize the impact of non-social work qualified staff in supporting families at an earlier stage of need, however, recruitment to such posts as PAs for care-experienced young people remains a challenge. There are strong and well-received internal processes for staff recognition, pay and rewards, helping to sustain staff retention.

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