

Inspection of Blackburn with Darwen local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 24 January to 4 February 2022

Lead inspector: Kathryn Grindrod, Her Majesty's Inspector

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

While the experiences of some children in Blackburn with Darwen have improved since a focused visit in February 2020, there has been an overall decline in the effectiveness of services for some children since the inspection in 2017, when services were judged to be good overall.

The local authority has had consistently high rates of COVID-19 infections throughout the pandemic. This has hindered some of the local authority's improvement plans, and also reduced the availability and engagement of police colleagues. The quality of immediate multi-agency responses to help and protect some children has deteriorated, as have services for care leavers. There remains more work to do to improve the quality of planning for children across the service and to develop the impact of advocacy and participation for children. The response to domestic abuse and neglect is not always sufficiently robust.

The local authority has prioritised areas for development identified through external reviews and inspections and this has led to improvements in the service and the quality of practice for some children in Blackburn with Darwen. The reduction in social worker caseloads in the systemic practice teams means that children in need of help and protection benefit from high-quality relationships with social workers, which is supporting an understanding of their experiences and enabling meaningful direct work. The quality of assessments for children in need of help and protection has generally improved, meaning children's experiences are better understood and

the support provided to them is appropriately focused. Children at risk of exploitation receive a well-coordinated response that helps them to be safer.

While local authority leaders have acted where issues had been identified by external reviews, they were not sighted on the impact of the shortfall found at this inspection relating to the immediate multi-agency response to safeguarding a small number of children. They were also unaware of the scale of poor practice across the care leavers service. The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on progress in embedding a sufficiently robust quality assurance framework to ensure continuous oversight of children's experiences and frontline practice.

What needs to improve?

- The multi-agency response to concerns that a child is suffering or is likely to suffer significant harm, particularly timely strategy discussions.
- Practice relating to securing or dispensing with parental consent during child protection investigations.
- The response to neglect and domestic abuse to ensure child-focused practice which measures impact through the difference made to children's lives.
- The quality of planning for children and care leavers across the service.
- The quality of life-story work and direct work with children in care.
- The timeliness of the discharge of care orders for children living at home with their parents.
- The quality of support, advice and guidance offered to care leavers over the age of 18.
- The provision of information for care leavers about their entitlements and health histories.
- The range and impact of participation and advocacy opportunities for children and care leavers.
- The effectiveness and impact of internal auditing and monitoring processes.

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

1. Children and families benefit from a comprehensive range of early help support. Early help assessments are mostly timely and proportionate, leading to effective planning and support to meet children's needs. Thresholds between early help and children's social care are appropriately applied for almost all children. This means that children usually get the right help at the right time, from a wide range of partner agencies.
2. When concerns for children are referred to the Children's Advice and Duty Service (CADS), the response is timely and appropriate for most children. Careful consideration of children's histories, along with proportionate

information-gathering, means that most children get the right help at the earliest opportunity. Parental consent is usually sought by other agencies, when appropriate, prior to them contacting CADs. CADs overrides parental consent, if needed, in order to protect children.

3. Appropriate multi-agency planning does not take place for some children at risk of harm prior to action being taken. A lack of police availability means that strategy discussions are sometimes delayed, and as a result, actions are sometimes taken by children's social care before multi-agency strategy discussions take place. Consequently, parental consent is not always appropriately sought or dispensed with during these informal single-agency investigations. Children are sometimes questioned several times before agreement is reached about how they will be interviewed and by whom. Alleged perpetrators are sometimes interviewed before consideration is given to the impact and consequences for children of this taking place.
4. Although sometimes delayed, strategy discussions are well attended by partner agencies and are generally effective. Decisions to progress with child protection enquiries are appropriate. The actions agreed at strategy discussions sometimes lack specific detail about how enquiries are to proceed, and the agreed arrangements for multi-agency safety planning while enquiries are ongoing.
5. Most assessments of children in need of help or protection are thorough and analytical. They carefully consider information from a broad range of partners and provide a good sense of children's experiences. This ensures that children's needs and risks are well considered, and that they receive the right support to reduce risks and meet needs.
6. Children in need of help and protection have plans that are specific about what needs to change to meet their needs and reduce risks. However, some plans lack timescales, and most plans lack detail of contingency arrangements. This makes it more difficult to monitor progress within children's timescales and a small number of children experience drift in their plans as a result.
7. Plans are formally reviewed with active involvement of parents and professionals. Family group conferencing is regularly used, empowering families to create and tailor their plans to reduce risk and build resilience to support long-term change. Children are helped by a broad range of support services, and many families benefit from bespoke packages of support delivered by family support workers. This includes the commissioning of culturally sensitive support work about healthy relationships, for example. As a result, many children's situations improve.
8. Direct work with children in need of help and protection is a strength. Children benefit from strong relationships with social workers who visit them regularly and who are passionate about improving children's lives.
9. The response to children who experience domestic abuse is inconsistent. Over-optimism about parental capacity to change, along with a lack of understanding about the complexities of domestic abuse, leads to an over-reliance on written

agreements to manage risks. This leaves a small number of children exposed to ongoing repeated incidents of domestic abuse.

10. When children experience neglect, there is decisive action taken in most cases when their circumstances do not improve. This has been the result of a strengthened strategic response from partners, including, for example, better and more effective use of the graded care profile tool. In a small number of cases, children experienced neglect for too long and cases were not stepped up to the pre-proceedings or proceedings stages of the Public Law Outline when parents were not making the changes needed.
11. Children who are at risk from or who have experienced criminal or sexual exploitation receive an effective well-coordinated multi-agency response. Holistic assessments of children's needs and any risks they may face lead to targeted actions to reduce risks and meet their wider needs. Their plans are reviewed regularly to ensure continued effectiveness of multi-agency actions. Intelligence is used to disrupt and prevent exploitation of children.
12. Children who go missing from home or care, or are at risk of going missing, also receive the right support at the right time. Push and pull factors for individual children are identified through well-crafted return home interviews. As a result, children have the right support to help them not to go missing, and agencies know how to act in their best interests should they do so.
13. Children who live in private fostering arrangements are well supported and have their needs met. While there are some delays in securing Disclosure and Barring Service checks to complete assessments, children benefit from robust planning and are visited regularly to ensure that they feel safe and that their wishes are heard.
14. Children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless are supported to secure somewhere to live, although they are not routinely informed of their right to come into the care of the local authority. This means they are not clear about all their entitlements to immediate and longer-term support.
15. Children who are missing from education and those children who are electively home educated benefit from robust monitoring systems. A joined-up and collaborative approach between schools and children's social care, which was further strengthened during the pandemic, ensures that these vulnerable children and young people are tracked and monitored, with swift actions taken if concerns arise.
16. Allegations against professionals are well managed. The response is swift and appropriate, ensuring that children are well protected in such circumstances. There is clear and strong tracking of allegations in place and the level of service offered is consistently proactive and effective.

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

17. Most children in care live in stable placements that meet their needs. Sensitive pathway planning helps children in care to prepare for adulthood and to leave care at a time that is right for them. When children turn 18, the quality of the support they receive deteriorates significantly and there is much to do to ensure that care leavers receive a similarly effective response.
18. Children who are in local authority care need to be in care. Senior managers have oversight of decisions about children entering care. As a result of careful matching, most children in care live in stable placements that meet their needs. Early consideration of permanence, along with parallel planning, prevents delays in progressing long-term plans for most children.
19. Children in care live with their brothers and sisters if it is appropriate for them to do so. They are helped and supported to spend time with people who are important to them. Children return home to their parents from care at a time when it is in their best interests for this to happen.
20. Potential family and friend carers are usually identified early and skilfully assessed. This means children are supported to live within their extended family when it is in their best interests. The timely use of family group conferences has improved practice in this regard. Children progress well in the care of family and friends carers, and careful planning ensures that special guardianship orders are usually secured in a timely way where appropriate.
21. Immediate risks to children in care are recognised and social workers take prompt action to secure children's wishes and explore risks to them. However, they do not consider the need for strategy discussions prior to taking action and interviewing children and adults. As with children in need of help and protection, this means decisions about immediate risks to some children are being made without access to full multi-agency information and planning.
22. Most children make positive progress while in care. Written care plans for children are too often out of date and they do not sufficiently detail children's wishes and feelings. A lack of clear timescales in care plans means that managers and independent reviewing officers (IROs) find it difficult to monitor and track progress for children. This contributes to drift in permanence being secured for a small number of children, for example those placed with their parents who remain subject to care orders at home for too long.
23. The circumstances of children in care are reviewed regularly and IROs ensure that the wishes and feelings of children are sought. Consideration is routinely given to children attending their meetings and contributing directly to discussions about them. The achievements of children in care are celebrated by the local authority.
24. IROs escalate concerns urgently and effectively when risks to children in care are not reducing or being well managed. When issues are less urgent, IRO

escalation is sometimes absent or ineffective. This lessens the impact IROs have on improving the quality of social work practice with children.

25. Most children in care are seen regularly by their social workers. The local authority's model of practice is less well embedded in this part of the service, and coupled with higher caseloads, this has a negative impact on the quality of relationships that social workers have with children. Direct work and life-story work with children often lacks purpose and does not help children to understand their lives and histories. This was an area for improvement in the inspection in 2017.
26. Children in care in Blackburn have access to an advocacy service but this is not often used, due to lack of awareness among children and professionals. As a result, children do not routinely benefit from the support of an advocate. A small number of children in care and care leavers are members of the local authority's Voice groups. These groups offer consultation to professionals about issues that affect children in care. The members of these groups are enthusiastic and committed to making changes that benefit children in care. While these groups are impactful, only a small number of children in care are able to contribute to service development.
27. Too many children wait too long to see a dentist in Blackburn with Darwen. While COVID-19 contributed to these delays, this is a long-standing issue for children in the area, and strategic plans to address the issue are only very recently starting to have an impact. Children have most of their other physical and emotional health needs met despite the challenges of COVID-19. This includes children placed outside the local authority area.
28. The virtual school team knows the needs of its children well. School leaders in and beyond the local authority boundaries speak highly of the guidance that they receive from the virtual school. They particularly value the support from the educational psychologist and the help provided to complete personal education plans (PEPs). Despite this support, the quality of PEPs remains inconsistent. In most plans, the agreed targets are too broad and vague. This means that the impact of these plans on improving children's education and achievement is not as effective as it could be.
29. Most children in care live within or close to Blackburn with Darwen in high-quality placements that meet their needs. Those living out of area have their needs well met. It is positive that no children in the care of Blackburn with Darwen currently live in unregistered children's homes. The use of unregulated provision for 16- to 17-year-olds is appropriate and meets their needs.
30. Children are cared for by foster carers who are appropriately skilled and supported to meet their needs. The foster carer recruitment strategy is comprehensive and creative. Foster carers are well supported through consistent supervising social workers and a comprehensive training offer. Foster panel arrangements are effective and child-focused.
31. Children benefit from effective planning of early permanence when adoption is in their best interests. The local authority holds the regional adoption agency,

Adoption Now, to account effectively. The recruitment of prospective adopters is appropriately informed and targeted by the specific needs of children. Prospective adopters are well prepared and supported. Adoption panel arrangements are effective. The number of children who are being adopted has increased slightly in recent times, and early parallel planning ensures that this happens quickly when it is appropriate for children.

32. Most children in care are supported to prepare for adulthood at a pace appropriate to their individual needs, although they do not always receive the identity documents and health histories they need. Social workers and personal advisers work well together to help and support children and to build their resilience as they approach the age of 18. Although still small in number, more children are being encouraged and supported to stay put with their foster carers. Pathway planning for these children is effective and meets their needs.
33. The service for care leavers aged 18 and over has deteriorated significantly since the last inspection and the quality of service they receive is poor.
34. The published offer for care leavers is not up to date. As a result, care leavers are not clear about their rights and entitlements, and personal advisers cannot always offer clarity. This means some young people do not receive the financial and practical support they are entitled to, such as help to pay for a driving licence.
35. Young people's relationships with their personal advisers are adversely affected by them having to change worker at 18. This means care leavers do not have enduring relationships with the people supporting them at this critical time in their lives and as they become more independent. At 21 years of age, most care leavers no longer have an allocated personal adviser, and have to go through a duty system to seek advice and support. The local authority removed these personal adviser transfer points as a result of feedback from inspectors and care leavers during this inspection.
36. Pathway planning for the majority of young people aged 18 to 21 is poor and ineffective. Agreed actions to support young people are too vague and lack ambition and aspiration. Young people often have to seek out and secure support from other professionals without the assistance of personal advisers. For those young people less able to do so, they risk becoming more isolated and not knowing who to approach when they need support.
37. Care leavers aged 18 to 21 are not usually actively supported and encouraged by their personal advisers to continue their education and training. Personal advisers do not always know the ambitions of care leavers and cannot therefore help them to achieve their potential. Some care leavers are left to attend university open days on their own, for example. Many care leavers do not progress well in their chosen studies or employment as a result of this lack of support and ambition.
38. Most care leavers are living in suitable accommodation that meets their needs when they turn 18. If their living arrangements change after they turn 18, they sometimes have to make accommodation arrangements without the practical

and emotional support of a personal adviser. This leaves some care leavers moving several times before they can settle somewhere permanent, and some care leavers move home with their belongings in bin bags. This shows a lack of care and respect for care leavers.

39. The majority of care leavers over the age of 21 receive reactive support from personal advisers through a request-based duty system. The local authority does not keep in touch with all of these care leavers routinely and to remind them of available support. The local authority does not have accurate data about the suitability of accommodation for care leavers aged 21 and over. This means the number of young people who are living in unsuitable arrangements is not known and they cannot therefore be supported to secure more suitable accommodation.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: requires improvement to be good

40. The local authority has shown commitment to children through financial investment to support the improvement of services for children following the focused visit in 2020. Although senior leaders and strategic partners seek to reassure themselves about the quality of services for children, they have not had a clear enough understanding about the overall experiences of some children in Blackburn with Darwen. While leaders and managers are responsive to external reviews and feedback, and tangible improvements have been made in some areas, internal quality assurance is not sufficiently embedded to ensure continuous oversight of frontline practice. Progress and development of internal mechanisms for assuring quality have been affected by COVID-19. As a result, there has been a significant deterioration in the quality of support for care leavers and leaders were not aware of the poor practice at the 'front door' when children are at risk of significant harm.
41. Blackburn with Darwen has a clear and aspirational corporate parenting strategy for 2021 to 2024 which has been co-produced with the children in care groups. The impact of this for children and families is limited so far. Corporate parenting responsibilities are not well met in relation to care leavers, and current participation arrangements do not enable care leavers to express their voice strongly enough for corporate parents to understand their experiences.
42. The local authority has a broad range of quality assurance, auditing and monitoring processes. However, these mechanisms do not always focus on children's experiences. As a result, social workers and managers are not always clear about what needs to change to improve outcomes for children and there is not a shared understanding across the service of what good practice looks like for children. In addition, inaccurate data about care leavers, as a result of electronic recording systems not being kept up to date, is providing false assurance about key performance indicators. These issues limit the impact of quality assurance and monitoring activity for individual children and service development.

43. Blackburn with Darwen children's services uses feedback regularly and invites external scrutiny and challenge of practice. The commissioning of external scrutiny has been a purposeful strategy during the pandemic to reduce workload pressures for frontline managers. For example, a peer review in 2021 led to improvements in pathway planning for 16- to 18-year-old children in care, helping them to better prepare for adulthood. While discrete areas for improvement have been identified and addressed through this process, it is not leading to a sufficiently detailed understanding of the whole service.
44. COVID-19 has affected the availability and engagement from some partners. The local authority has not challenged effectively the lack of police availability for strategy discussions. The local authority escalated two cases of concern to the police in July and October 2021. The local authority understood these to be isolated cases; however, the inspection has highlighted further examples of strategy discussions not taking place when required over the last six months. Senior leaders in the local authority were not aware of the prevalence of this practice and took immediate action as a result of these inspection findings, liaising with their counterparts in the police and also amending the role of CADS in responding to referrals about immediate risk to children.
45. The local authority's relationships with schools are strong, and school leaders greatly value the advice from the CADs service. School leaders report effective working relationships with social workers and were positive about the impact this has for children. There is positive engagement with health partners, although insufficient progress has been made in relation to children's access to dental services. The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) and the judiciary value the contribution senior leaders make to the local family justice board, and report leaders to be accessible and responsive.
46. Despite the impact of COVID-19, some improvements have been made since the focused visit in February 2020. The creation of deputy director posts has created the additional capacity needed to facilitate a greater internal focus on the quality of practice. Caseloads have significantly reduced following the introduction of CADS and there is a more determined focus on early help support for families. The impact of this has been significant for children in need of help and protection, who benefit from social workers who have the time to spend getting to know them and ensuring that their needs are met. The impact for staff has also been positive, with staff describing significant improvements in relation to being able to undertake meaningful work with children.
47. The implementation of the local authority's practice model is starting to improve the quality and consistency of social work practice for children. However, systemic thinking is not fully embedded into practice. There is more to do to improve consistency in planning for children and young people across the service. The response to neglect is better informed and timelier than it was at the last inspection for most, but not all, children.
48. Social workers benefit from an extensive training offer which supports their work with children. Newly qualified social workers receive appropriate support, advice and guidance to develop their skills and practice at an appropriate pace

for them and the children they work with. Social workers demonstrate commitment to their learning and improving their practice, and they value opportunities to develop their knowledge and skills through reflective supervision and learning circles. The career pathways and development opportunities afforded to social workers, along with recent changes and management support, are helping to retain social workers.

49. Management oversight of frontline practice has improved overall since the focused visit in 2020. However, where practice is not as strong as it needs to be, managers and IROs do not always challenge and address this. This means some children do not have good-quality assessments which can then lead to well-informed and effective plans. It also means a small number of children have experienced neglect or domestic abuse for too long without effective intervention.
50. Social workers receive regular supervision, which they describe as helpful in deciding how best to support and protect children. This can sometimes, but not always, be seen in written records of supervision sessions. Where social work or personal adviser practice is not strong, there is limited evidence to show how managers are guiding and supporting improvements. The recorded minutes of supervision lack reflection at times, and some are overly focused on compliance at the expense of considering children's experiences.
51. Staff report that senior leaders are visible, kind and accessible. They appreciate regular and informative sessions with heads of service. They describe a supportive culture, and one where they are encouraged to learn and develop. Staff feel that managers care about their well-being and have supported them to feel safe throughout the pandemic while they continued with 'business as usual' in their work with children. Staff enjoy working for Blackburn with Darwen and this is contributing to a reducing staff turnover rate.

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