

# Barnsley

## Inspection of children’s social care services

**Inspection dates: 8 October 2018 to 19 October 2018**

**Lead inspector: Jan Edwards**  
**Her Majesty’s Inspector**

<b>Judgement</b>	<b>Grade</b>
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 and care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Services for children in Barnsley are good and there has been steady improvement at successive inspections since 2012. Children are at the heart of strategic thinking, decision-making, and operational practice, which leads to good-quality services from a skilled and motivated workforce. The resolute focus on improving outcomes for children is shared across the partnership and is underpinned by political commitment and financial investment and a self-evaluation that shows that leaders know their services well.

Almost all children who need help and protection receive a timely service that meets their needs. The integrated ‘front door’ is effective in managing risk and protecting children. Thorough assessments with a well-considered analysis of the risks affecting children lead, for the most part, to targeted plans and interventions which are improving outcomes and reducing risk effectively. A greater focus is needed in relation to the use of private fostering. The timeliness and quality of return home interviews and understanding of broader contextual safeguarding are not as effective for some children.

Services for children in care and care leavers are good, and children's outcomes improve because of the support they receive from workers. Children in Barnsley benefit from a committed and 'pushy' corporate parent with a determination to raise the aspiration of all children, families, and the communities in which they live. However, improvement is needed to increase the number of young people in education, employment and training.

## What needs to improve

- Risk assessment and the understanding of the wider risks to which young people are exposed in the community, including the timeliness and quality of return home interviews when children are reported missing from home and care.
- Regular review of the use of private fostering arrangements to ensure that they remain appropriate to meet children's needs.
- The numbers of care leavers aged 19–21 in education, employment and training.
- The rigour of audit and dip sampling activity and how data informs an understanding of the quality of practice and timeliness performance for initial child protection case conferences.

## The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: Good

1. Children and families benefit from a good early help offer, which has been redesigned to be delivered through a family centre 0–19 model. This is ensuring a more equitable distribution of targeted support at the heart of communities and where it is most needed.
2. There are a number of established pathways for access to early help services, children's social care, and disabled children. A clear understanding of thresholds by partners has meant that there has been no detrimental impact of having several entry points for access to services. Consultation and advice is provided to professionals for those families who do not meet a threshold for a service. Senior managers have regular oversight through dip sampling of contacts and referrals to assure themselves of the consistent application of thresholds for a service. This ensures that the right children get the right help.
3. The multi-agency Early Help Panel provides a thorough approach to the triage of new early help referrals and the step up or step down from children's social care. A range of targeted parenting interventions are carefully evaluated for impact. Family support workers are trained in the use of the graded care profile so that neglect is understood from the earliest point that children access a service.
4. The integrated front door and multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) in Barnsley work well to protect children. The initial screening of referrals is strong. It involves the gathering of historical and multi-agency information, which is well analysed and subject to rigorous management oversight. No children were found to be in situations of unassessed or unmanaged risk.

Thresholds are understood by partners, including those who are co-located and engaged effectively in the MASH. Robust arrangements are in place to safeguard children, including those at risk from the impact of domestic abuse. Parental consent is consistently sought and recorded, and when situations require consent to be dispensed with, the rationale for decisions are clear and appropriate. Families and professionals are routinely informed of the outcome of the referral.

5. When screening identifies the need for an assessment or that risk has escalated, there is a seamless transfer of cases to the assessment team, supported by a clear management oversight. Strategy meetings are timely, well attended by relevant partners and clearly record the evidence, with an analysis of what this means for children, and a rationale given for decisions made. Child protection enquiries are thorough, with a clear shared accountability by partners of their responsibility in the safety plan. Children are seen, and their views contribute to action planning. Most children in Barnsley have the benefit of a timely and proportionate response when they need help and support. However, for a small number of children there is unnecessary delay built into the process, because further strategy meetings are being convened prior to them having their needs considered at a child protection conference. This means that this small number of children do not have the benefit of the safeguards of multi-agency planning and monitoring that is afforded when children are subject to a child protection plan at the earliest opportunity. The local authority accepted this during inspection and have plans in place to address the timeliness and delay for children.
6. Assessments are of good quality and they describe the child's world well, although the impact of diversity on the child's identity is not consistently recognised or addressed. The analysis is well formulated, identifying risks and resilience factors that impact on the child's lived experience. Sometimes, key information may be lost for families because assessments are often overly descriptive and repetitious.
7. Children's plans describe well the reasons and triggers that lead to the need for the plan. However, they do not always cover all the risks or detail what needs to be done to improve the child's situation. Very few plans include an explicit and individualised contingency plan. This makes it difficult for parents and others to understand what is expected of them or what will happen if change is not achieved. Better plans evolve as progress is made and prioritise those risks that require immediate attention through targeted interventions and services which help to reduce harm. Plans are regularly reviewed through timely and well-attended core groups and child in need meetings. In most cases, progress is well documented between meetings to enable plans to be amended accordingly.
8. The strong multi-agency partnerships in Barnsley ensures good participation at child protection conferences, with children offered the opportunity to have

advocates to support them through the process. Child protection chairs carefully prepare parents to participate and ensure that they understand the reasons for the concerns leading to conference.

9. Social workers know their children well and their understanding of children's circumstances is informed by social workers who are professionally curious and tenacious in their work with families. Good examples of direct work to establish children's wishes and feelings were seen during the inspection. However, this in-depth understanding and knowledge is not always well reflected in children's case records.
10. The practice relating to help and protection in the disabled children's team is good. Social workers are aspirational for these vulnerable children, and the child's voice shines through in the work. Children's situations improve and the risk of harm reduces as a result of the good assessments that inform strong multi-agency planning, leading to effective support and interventions for children. There is timely and proactive transition planning with adult services.
11. Threshold decision-making, for example when to escalate from child in need to child protection or when to step down to early help, is generally appropriate to children's individual circumstances. Children benefit from effective legal planning when their circumstances do not improve. Pre-proceedings work is timely and well managed, with a contract of expectations that clearly spell out what parents need to do. When parents successfully engage in helping to improve their children's lives, legal planning is ended. When improvements are not made, authoritative action is taken. This means that children are getting the right help at the right time from the right people.
12. Where there is an indication of possible risk from sexual or criminal exploitation, referrals are screened and assessed effectively by a specialist child sexual exploitation social worker. The weekly child sexual exploitation meeting provides a robust multi-agency forum for information-sharing, consideration of relevant risk factors and soft intelligence. This is used to reach a joint and proportionate rating of the level of risk and to formulate action plans. However, subsequent planning and intervention by social workers is not effective for all children. For a small number of children, there is a lack of focus on evaluating and reducing risk posed by their wider network or from the community. This results in assessments and plans that do not address all the risks to ensure that they are protected.
13. The response to children going missing is not robust enough for all children. While there is a clear strategic framework around episodes of going missing and reporting mechanisms into panel, inspectors found variability in the timely offer of an interview following a missing episode. In some cases, there was a lack of persistence in engaging young people with return home interviews. The quality of the information obtained was often poor. This means that the local authority cannot be assured in all cases that the broader risks associated with

children going missing are known and being addressed in order to reduce that risk. Neither can the local authority be assured that young people are always being effectively supported to reduce their risk-taking behaviour.

14. There are effective systems in place to identify and monitor children missing from education and children who are electively home educated (EHE).
15. A small number of children are supported through private fostering arrangements. Inspectors found that, for some children, there is a delay in securing a suitable legal framework that best meets their needs. Safety is assessed, and support and monitoring of children in private fostering arrangements is in place. However, this may not always be the most suitable arrangement to secure stability and long-term planning for their future.

### **The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: Good**

16. When children come in to care, they receive a good service. Decision-making is based on clear assessments of children's needs that are appropriate and timely. Children are matched carefully with carers who promote their needs and help them to achieve.
17. There are well-established and collaborative working relationships with the local judiciary and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), which have a clear focus on the child. This ensures that timely and appropriate decisions are made in order to safeguard and secure permanence for children. There is judicious use of parental agreement to accommodation.
18. Social workers know their children well and understand key factors that contribute to children's stability in placement and the child's unique experiences and context. The stability of the social work staff team means that children benefit from established relationships with someone they know well. Sensitive and thoughtful direct work to elicit children's wishes and feelings influences planning and interventions for children. All children in care benefit from life-story work that helps them to understand their situations. Children's wishes and feelings are actively sought and acted on.
19. The importance of contact with birth family members is well understood by social workers. The sensitive approach taken to engage birth families in clear and up-to-date contact plans means that there is a positive impact on children's emotional needs. This also contributes to the stability of placements.
20. Foster carer recruitment, training and approval are effective. Foster carers report that they feel part of the professional network and that their views are valued and used to influence policy and developments. The service has been able to address the issue of sufficiency of local foster carers through a new

recruitment strategy. This has resulted in a substantial increase to the number of foster carers and means that the majority of children can live with Barnsley carers.

21. Carers are well informed of children's needs before placement. Supervising social workers take care to ensure that children are matched appropriately to a fostering family, including for long-term fostering. Important consideration is also given to the needs of foster carers' birth children. As a result, children are helped to develop secure attachments in stable placements.
22. Children's care plans identify and meet their needs. Children experience improved outcomes when they come in to care. They are encouraged to develop their interests and aspirations. Children are supported to participate in their reviews, with independent reviewing officers (IROs) providing effective oversight and challenge. The positive approach taken to engage with birth families means that children benefit from information shared by birth families that would otherwise be withheld because of the difficult emotional climate that surrounds family separation. This is a strength of the children in care team.
23. There are a small number of children whose emotional health needs are not being adequately met by the provision of a child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS). The provision of consultation for carers does help to support placements. However, there remain gaps in the provision of direct support to children from CAMHS. Where CAMHS cannot meet the identified emotional health needs of children in care, social workers can access funding from the local authority for external therapeutic support or refer to commissioned third sector providers. Schools are creatively using the pupil premium funding grant for a range of therapies to support children with additional emotional health needs.
24. The majority of children benefit from timely and well-considered options for permanence. Foster to adopt is used when appropriate to support early permanence. Social workers recognise the importance of promoting all aspects of permanence, including special guardianship, adoption, long-term fostering and a return to family. High-quality special guardianship assessments inform decisions regarding whether children can safely stay within their extended family network. Careful thought is given to the relationships of brothers and sisters in considering future permanence plans.
25. Children with a wide range of needs benefit from achieving permanence through adoption, including older children, brothers and sisters together, and children with complex needs. Persistence in family finding can extend timescales for some children. The local authority recognises that the timescales for matching children need to improve to enable children to move into their new families without undue delay. The adoption support fund is used well to meet children's therapeutic needs in both their adoptive or special guardianship placements.

26. Child permanence reports are well written, child centred and bring the child to life. They are an effective tool for matching. Decisions made by the agency decision maker (ADM) are clearly recorded, with a good rationale for ratification of the adoption plan.
27. Life appreciation days provide a guided journey through the child's life. This enables adopters to develop empathy for and understanding of the child's experiences. Letter box contact is well managed, ensuring that children can maintain contact with significant family members to promote their identity and sense of family history.
28. The virtual school headteacher provides strong leadership and direction for her team. There are effective relationships with schools in monitoring the quality of personal education plans (PEPs), tracking attendance and the use of the pupil premium grant, and in providing appropriate challenge. The quality of PEPS has improved since the last inspection, although there is a recognition that the quality of targets is variable. The termly personal education plans (TPEPs) are detailed and set out expected outcomes for a wide range of therapeutic inputs for children in care. These happen in the school environment and include art and play therapy and nurture sessions. The percentage of children in care attending a good or better school has increased. Attendance for children in care is in line with the national average, and persistent absence is below the national average. However, the local authority knows that incidents of fixed-term exclusion for children in care remain too high. The virtual school headteacher is providing additional support for schools. For example, training has been provided for designated teachers to support teachers to be trauma- and attachment-focused and to understand their impact on pupils' learning and behaviour.
29. Historically, employment, education and training (EET) levels for 17- and 18-year-olds have been below the national average and below statistical neighbours. As a result, an EET panel was established to bring together targeted information advice and guidance (TIAG), the virtual school headteacher and the future directions service. This has been successful in achieving an increase in the numbers of 17- and 18-year-olds in EET. Although improving, only around half of all young people aged 19–21 are in EET, and this remains a priority for the local authority to improve.
30. There is an active and vocal children in care council (CiCC), Care4US, which has worked hard to influence service development through its annual 'takeover of the service event' and on such areas as The Pledge, peer mentoring, recruitment for foster carers, presenting to the corporate parenting panel and developing the documents for reviews.
31. Young people leaving care benefit from proactive and diligent personal advisers, who work hard to keep and maintain relationships with them, even

when young people are reluctant to engage. Support needs are captured in plans that are co-produced with young people. They are up to date and simple to understand. Although young people receive information about their health histories, there is more to do to ensure that this information is meaningful and provided in a more accessible format.

32. For some older young people, particularly where they have been involved in criminal activity, assessments and subsequent intervention is not informed by multi-agency information about the range of risks to which they are exposed. The risks that children may pose to others is not always well understood, and a lack of understanding of criminal exploitation also results in social workers failing to fully evaluate the risks posed to young people by others at the point that they return to the community. For a small number of older children, this means that although they are provided with support, effective multi-agency plans are not in place early enough. This leaves them potentially vulnerable to further exploitation.
33. Children in care and care leavers receive assistance and support from a range of services in order to strengthen their journey into full independence. For example, there is good support from allied services such as the targeted information advice and guidance service (TIAG), council tax exemption up to the age of 25, and ring-fenced council apprenticeships. Opportunities for young people to remain with foster carers after their 18th birthdays are promoted, and all young people are in suitable accommodation that meets their needs. This means that young people are benefiting from stability in their living arrangements, which is promoting their confidence in their increasing independent skills.
34. Most care leavers spoken to described Barnsley as a good place to experience care. Senior managers have been highly receptive to the views of young people and have acted swiftly when issues have been raised with them. Several care leavers told inspectors that they had been well supported through leaving care and into independence, through university and into employment.

## **The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: Good**

35. Effective and principled leadership by the executive director, chief executive and leader of the council models and sets out high aspirations for children in Barnsley. Collectively, they have driven the continuous improvement journey that shows that practice in Barnsley is now good and that the majority of children receive a good service that is making a difference to their lives.

36. Strategic and operational partnerships are mature and effective, and thresholds for services are understood across the partnerships. There is political commitment to protecting the children's services budget, as well as continued investment.
37. The service benefits from a stable and highly committed leadership team, led by the executive director, which has been instrumental in delivering against the continuous service improvement plan. The self-assessment is realistic and demonstrates ambition to continue to do even better. Service effectiveness is well understood, and areas for development and improvement are identified and progressed. There is a clear focus on continuous learning and improvement throughout the organisation and from external peer review and challenge.
38. Senior managers are held to account through a clear governance structure from the chief executive down. The involvement of the lead member, executive director and service director in practice observations and the visibility in social work teams is impressive. A range of trackers and panels have improved management oversight and help prevent drift and delay in most areas of the service, particularly in relation to achieving permanence.
39. The audits reviewed by inspectors did not always fully involve social workers or take account of feedback from children and families and were not moderated. This means that audit activity misses some opportunities to develop practice through feedback. The service recognises that the approach to audit and learning from audit is ready for further development. Other quality assurance activity is better embedded, including lead member visits, themed audits, dip sampling and reporting arrangements. These all contribute to a framework for quality assurance that has clear lines of accountability from the top down.
40. Managers have a good grip on most areas of practice. This has led to improvements in the timeliness of social work assessments, in the strength of the voice of the child and in dynamic planning. However, some sampling activity by managers to assure themselves of the quality of practice on timeliness of progression to the initial child protection case conference (ICPCC) lacks rigour. This has led to a false assurance of the robustness of practice in this area. Inspectors have identified that the reporting on timeliness of strategy meetings to the ICPCC has led to an inaccurate picture of the degree of delay experienced by children. Furthermore, this means that a small number of children have not had the benefit of being protected through a child protection plan at the earliest opportunity.
41. Leaders understand well the communities they serve. The infrastructure of early help has been redesigned through a family centre delivery model, which has meant a more equitable distribution of targeted resource in local communities. This is aimed at strengthening the resilience of children and their families through the provision of a wide range of services and interventions in

the neighbourhoods in which they live. Thresholds for early help are clearly understood, and this has resulted in lower level work being diverted away from social work services to universal or targeted early help for assessment and intervention.

42. There is a clear strategic infrastructure for monitoring vulnerable groups such as those children who are sexually exploited and those who go missing. However, senior managers recognise that while training has been delivered for the workforce, the understanding of contextual safeguarding is not yet as consistently embedded through practice as it might be. Neglect and its cumulative impact on children is well understood and has been supported using the graded care profile. This enables earlier identification of neglect and helps to target interventions in order to improve children's circumstances.
43. Leaders have responded appropriately to the gaps in mental health provision through a respectful challenge to the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG). This has contributed to an improvement in timeliness for access to the CAMHS initial assessment, and senior managers from both services are jointly tracking timeliness of interventions offered by CAMHS. However, some children in care who require direct mental health provision and support from CAMHS are not yet receiving a timely enough service for treatment.
44. Barnsley council is an effective and proud corporate parent. Leaders are ambitious for children in care and are particularly well engaged with the active CiCC. Senior leaders and the corporate parenting panel have regular contact with children and ensure that the views of children and young people influence how services are delivered.
45. Improvements in the education of children in care is a priority for leaders, although there remains more to do. Children are benefiting from an effective virtual school. This has improved the overall quality of PEPs and has included a creative use of the pupil premium grant that has supported schools to be trauma and attachment aware, ensuring more effective support for children.
46. Social work practice in Barnsley is flourishing. Social workers are confident practitioners who know their children well. Practice is child-focused and the voice of the child is embedded throughout the service. Manager oversight of individual cases is clearly evidenced. Leaders and managers have created a culture in which social workers are valued, feel valued, and are proud to work for Barnsley.
47. Workforce stability is excellent, which means that children benefit from being able to develop consistent relationships with social workers. While caseloads are high for some social workers, they feel that they can practise effectively because of co-allocation, supervision and management oversight, and a supportive service and team culture. Social workers report that they benefit from reflective supervision, although this is not always well recorded. Staff

morale is high, and staff are proud to work in Barnsley. They are positive about the support, guidance and training they receive and the visibility of senior managers.



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