

Inspection of Bury local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 9 to 20 June 2025

Lead inspector: Rebecca Dubbins, 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	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children in care	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

Services for children and families in Bury have improved since the last inspection in 2021, when the overall effectiveness was inadequate. Although not consistently good, far more children are receiving services that are making a positive difference to their lives and helping to ensure that they are safe and well cared for than was found at the time of the last inspection. Leaders have taken an incremental and persistent approach to improvement by establishing effective multi-agency partnerships and utilising external and independent scrutiny. Leaders have a clear understanding of the further improvements needed and have effective plans in place aimed at ensuring that all children receive a consistently good-quality service. Improved services and better outcomes for children are now a priority for the council, and significant investment has strengthened workforce capacity to meet need and has ensured that appropriately focused services are available to support children and families.

A comprehensive quality assurance framework has enabled leaders to have an accurate understanding of the effectiveness of services delivered to children and families. The leadership team's considerable efforts to address recruitment, retention and high caseloads have helped to stabilise the workforce and improve the quality of

the work undertaken. Staff told inspectors that there has been a positive change in culture. Nonetheless, there remain inconsistencies in children's experiences because of staff turnover since the last inspection, leading to drift and delay for some children, which have impacted negatively on their outcomes. This drift is not always challenged effectively by team managers and independent reviewing officers (IROs), and this means action to address cumulative harm is not consistently timely for these children.

What needs to improve?¹

- The quality of plans and contingency planning for children, including timescales for action (outcome 3, national framework)
- The effectiveness of supervision and management oversight in addressing drift or delay for children (enabler 2, national framework)
- The impact and effectiveness of child protection conference chairs' and IROs' escalations (enabler 3, national framework)
- The quality of effectiveness of direct work with children, including life-story work, to gather children's views and understanding of why they are in care (principle 2, national framework)
- The consistency of decisions by the local authority designated officer (LADO) and the extent to which those decisions are evidenced (outcome 3, national framework)

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

1. Children and families benefit from effective early help services. Assessments provide an accurate picture of families' needs to determine what intervention and help families receive. Children and their families benefit from a multi-agency network of professionals who meet regularly with them. The views of families and their children are an integral aspect of planning processes to understand if support has been effective and to achieve positive outcomes. When concerns increase for children, appropriate action is taken to step up to statutory services.
2. When professionals are concerned about children, these concerns are appropriately referred into the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). Children and families mostly receive a timely and appropriate response to these concerns. Workers and their managers in the MASH apply thresholds effectively, demonstrating an appropriate understanding of risk to children. Social workers follow up concerns in a timely way, seeking consent from

¹ The areas for improvement have been cross-referenced with the outcomes, enablers or principles in the [Children's Social Care: National Framework](#). This statutory guidance sets out the purpose, principles for practice and expected outcomes of children's social care.

parents when this is appropriate. For some children who are the subject of repeat referrals, workers in the MASH do not always consider the family history robustly enough. This means that the experiences of children over time are not always captured in decision-making.

3. The responses to children in emergency situations by the out-of-hours service are effective. Workers respond to concerns raised about children in a timely way. There is good connectivity with daytime staff to ensure a joined-up response, which allows for children and families' needs to be met whatever the time of day.
4. The impact of domestic abuse on children is well understood, with timely police referrals to the MASH. When there are serious concerns relating to children who are victims of domestic abuse, a discussion is held at the daily action planning meeting so that a multi-agency consideration of risk can take place.
5. When children are considered to be at risk, most child protection strategy discussions take place swiftly. These discussions are well attended by professionals, who share relevant information about their involvement with the family. As an outcome of these discussions, risks to children are identified with a clear plan of action to mitigate risk. Subsequent child protection investigations ensure that immediate and ongoing concerns for children's safety are addressed. Safety plans are put in place to protect children while workers devise plans to support families to make the changes needed.
6. When allegations are made against professionals who work with children, there are inconsistencies in the robustness and effectiveness of the response. The rationale behind decision-making by the LADO is not always consistent or evidenced in written records. When there are concerns about ineffective practice, the LADO has not appropriately escalated matters, meaning that some children may be left in circumstances where risk is unassessed.
7. Children and family assessments of their needs are undertaken with positive engagement from children and families, with their views clearly reflected. Practitioners routinely explore the wider family network to determine what support can be provided by family and friends. These assessments incorporate information from other professionals and outline the presenting issues, but do not always fully consider historical information. Repeat assessments for some children do not always consider their experiences over time. Chronologies are not always used effectively to prevent practitioners and their managers from considering risk in isolation. Consequently, a small number of children experience cyclical social care interventions that span significant periods of their life without change being sustained.
8. When children and their families no longer require statutory intervention, they receive the right help and support to meet any ongoing needs.

9. Most children subject to child protection and child-in-need plans receive effective support from practitioners in the family safeguarding teams. These multi-disciplinary teams incorporate the expertise of other professionals who work alongside the social workers to maximise the support that can be provided to children and their families. Children are visited regularly. Some children have a consistent worker, which helps children to be open about their experiences. This is not the case for other children, however, who have experienced multiple changes of worker, and this has hindered positive relationship building.
10. Multi-agency child protection conferences and child-in-need meetings are well attended by families and professionals, allowing for information to be shared and concerns to be understood. Plans are devised to address these concerns. For some children, however, the plans are not always effective, do not address the impact of cumulative harm and do not have timebound actions with explicit contingency plans in place. This means that children and families are not always aware of what will happen and by when, including in the event that children's circumstances do not improve.
11. Child protection and child-in-need plans are reviewed regularly. However, for some children, this has not improved progress, which has been too slow. A legacy of social work instability and high staff turnover means that, for these children, their plans have drifted without children and families receiving the help they need. Child protection conference chairs have not always escalated concerns when children's plans have not progressed, and when they do escalate, this is not always effective. More recently, there has been a reduction in staff turnover, which has meant that children and their families are more likely to be supported by a consistent worker and their plans are more likely to progress in a timelier way.
12. A small number of children who step down from a child protection plan to a child-in-need plan at the first review do so prematurely. The multi-agency team around the child considers the risk identified, but this does not always lead to a suitably cautious approach with a clear evidence-based analysis. This happens when there are outstanding actions from the child protection plan that have been carried over but not completed. As a result, for these children, their lived experiences and any future harm are not sufficiently addressed.
13. Management oversight and the effectiveness of practice for children in the pre-proceedings phase of the Public Law Outline have strengthened since the last inspection, but there remains inconsistency with some children not escalating into care proceedings soon enough. While risks are being managed for those children, the effects of legacy issues from social work turnover and delayed parenting assessments have prevented decisive action being taken until more recently. The timescales for pre-proceedings are now reducing, demonstrating that plans are progressing in a timelier way. Letters before proceedings are suitably focused on both the concerns and the strengths, with appropriate language to match the gravity of the situation. Help is being provided to try to keep families together, when this is safe to do so and in children's best

interests. As a result, an increasingly higher number of families are supported to make the necessary changes for children to remain at home.

14. Management oversight is seen at appropriate points in children's records. This provides a clear and evidenced rationale for decision-making. For some children who have experienced a significant history of neglect or domestic abuse, there is not always sufficient curiosity from managers about the impact of ongoing harm, and managers have not addressed the drift and delay children have experienced.
15. When children aged 16 to 17 present as homeless, they are offered support to remain with their families, seeking the support of the wider family network. When this is not possible, children are informed of their rights, including to become looked after, and provided with accommodation and support that meet their needs.
16. Most disabled children are seen regularly by social workers who have developed close relationships with them. Plans in place to meet these children's needs arise from assessments that address their individual and holistic needs, while appropriately considering any risks. Disabled children receiving a package of support, who do not require social work intervention, have their needs regularly reviewed by family support workers to ensure that this support continues to meet their needs.
17. There are very few children identified as living in private fostering arrangements. When this is identified, practice is not effective, as some children are placed in this arrangement before risks are fully assessed. Leaders have identified this concern and are addressing this, alongside an awareness-raising campaign to assist them to identify children living in such arrangements.
18. When children are at risk outside of the home, practitioners in the contextual safeguarding team respond effectively. Assessments are thorough and understand the contributing factors that can increase risks. A multi-agency professional group provides bespoke support to children and their families, working alongside the social worker to reduce the risk to children. When children go missing from home, return home interviews are used to understand the causes and any additional risk posed as a result. Management oversight of this area of work is strong, providing challenge and reflection when needed to assist workers to make sense of what a child needs.
19. The oversight of electively home-educated children is not as consistent as it should be. The numbers of school-aged children who are missing out on their educational entitlement, or who are not on roll at a school, are rising in Bury. The local authority has arrangements in place to be informed about these children. Some of these procedures are still being developed and strengthened since the last inspection to ensure suitable oversight for all children.

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

20. Children only come into care when it is appropriate and necessary to safeguard their welfare. For most children, this is in a planned, but not always timely, way.
21. When children are unable to safely remain living with their parents, practitioners explore at an early stage whether children can remain living within their kinship network. Many children benefit from their kinship carers becoming their special guardians at the conclusion of care proceedings. A recently refreshed special guardianship offer includes a comprehensive financial and support package, which remains available until children become adults. This provides the support necessary for carers to pursue such kinship-based permanence options when they are in children's best interests. While the timeliness of court proceedings is an ongoing issue for some children, there have been improvements seen more recently. The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) and the local family judiciary were positive about the quality of practice, with the voice of children being cited as a particular strength.
22. Permanence planning has been strengthened since the previous inspection, but there remains more to do to ensure that permanence is achieved for all children without delay. Social workers consider permanence options for children and progress these concurrently to help identify what the best permanence option is for children. Many children achieve permanence through long-term fostering. For some, albeit a reducing number of children, it is taking too long for them to be formally matched and approved with their carers. This leaves these children with some uncertainty about their living arrangements.
23. Children achieve timely permanence via adoption when this is identified as the right plan for them. Early permanence options are thoroughly explored, and an increasing number of children are placed in foster to adopt placements. This means that some children benefit from consistency of care from the earliest opportunity.
24. Since the previous inspection, there has been a high turnover of social workers. More recently though, increased workforce stability in the care and support service has meant that an increasing number of children have been able to develop meaningful relationships with a consistent social worker who they know and learn to trust. Social workers visit children frequently. However, these visits do not necessarily increase when children's circumstances require it, or when social workers are developing and building relationships with children. This means that social workers are not always responsive to the needs of children, and it takes longer for these relationships to develop.
25. The quality of direct work with children is highly variable, with much work being superficial and not addressing key issues. For most children in care, there is an

absence of effective life-story work. As a result, children are not helped to understand their past experiences and journey into and through care.

26. Children's changing needs are captured by regularly updated assessments that focus on the support required to help children make progress. These assessments inform children's care plans effectively, which outline how children's day-to-day needs will be met. Most children are actively engaged in their care planning. Children in care are also routinely offered advocates to ensure that their voices are heard. Children's views are responded to in a meaningful way, with their workers explaining the rationale if these views cannot be acted on.
27. Children's care planning arrangements are mostly reviewed regularly. The impact and effectiveness of IROs, though, are inconsistent. This has been negatively impacted by absence and staff turnover. While leaders have created additional capacity, some children have had changes in IROs who have not had the oversight or provided the right challenge when care plans have not progressed. When IROs do escalate concerns on behalf of children, this has not consistently made a positive difference for children.
28. Children in care are supported to maintain key relationships. They have family time arranged to see their parents, brothers and sisters, or others that are important to them, and are actively involved in these decisions. Workers collaborate with family members effectively to meet children's short- and long-term needs.
29. The progress that children in care make at school and their attendance are variable. For some children, their progress and attendance decline as they progress through their secondary phase of education. Some children in care attend alternative provision, with leaders providing effective oversight to explore all options to ensure that children return to schools that meet their needs. Rates of suspensions are high for children in care, and some of these children experience disrupted learning. They are not well prepared for their next stages of education, employment or training, or for greater independence in adulthood as a result. Personal education plans are in place to support children. These help schools to plan the support needed for children. Sometimes, targets do not make clear what children in care need most to learn or develop.
30. Children's health needs are informed by regular health assessments, and these are understood by social workers who work with other professionals to ensure that these services are provided promptly. However, for children requiring autism spectrum disorder assessments, and for those who have emotional health needs, they are sometimes waiting too long to have their needs assessed and met. Leaders have recognised this and are in the process of recruiting to a bespoke team to mitigate the risks of children waiting too long.

31. Social workers in the disability service have a good understanding of the physical and emotional needs of the children in care, through regular visits and positive relationship building. Written records of visits to children show workers using reflection and creative ways to engage children with communication needs. Disabled children in care have plans that are bespoke to the individual needs of the child, which includes effective transition planning into adulthood to ensure that this is timely and meets the needs of the young person.
32. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are supported by their social workers to make good progress. Social workers take the time to understand children's experiences and any associated trauma, and this is used effectively to plan for children's education, their health, to obtain the right legal status and to enable children to have positive experiences.
33. Children in care who go missing and/or who are at risk of exploitation in its different forms receive an inconsistent response, depending on the risks presented. Overall, those children at high risk receive an effective multi-agency response, with social workers supported by the specialist workers in the contextual safeguarding team. When risks to children are lower, this is not always identified by their social workers, and risk assessments are not always undertaken to reflect children's changing needs. This means that some children in care do not receive targeted timely support to prevent risks to them escalating.
34. Most children in care in Bury live in high-quality foster placements, where they are able to pursue their hobbies and engage in enriching activities that help to boost their confidence and self-esteem. For a small number of children who have entered care in an emergency, they experience some placement moves before the most suitable placement is identified for them. Foster carers in Bury value the support provided by their workers and the wider service offer. As a result of this support, the local authority has been able to retain foster carers, and this has led to increased stability for children.
35. Sufficiency challenges are in the process of being addressed by senior leaders to ensure that all children live in homes that meet their needs. In the interim, there are several younger children who have lived in or moved into residential care at a young age, after extensive local and national searches for foster placements, when assessments concluded foster placements would better meet their needs. Leaders have taken steps to ensure that more placements are available to meet children's bespoke needs. Services have been commissioned to enable a comprehensive assessment of children's needs and to plan this transition, which includes children returning home when possible. Plans for children are underway, although it is too soon to see the impact of these.
36. Senior leaders have a zero-tolerance approach to the use of unregistered children's homes, and this expectation is conveyed across the workforce with positive impact. As a result of this determined approach, despite the sufficiency

challenges, leaders have been highly effective in preventing children being placed in such placements for approximately one year.

37. Older children aged 16 to 17 are placed in registered supported accommodation when this is assessed to be the right plan for them. Social workers, with senior management oversight, carefully consider whether the home and support available can appropriately meet the children's needs. Young people are consulted on their proposed homes with planned introductions taking place.
38. Members of the children in care council are well supported by the children's rights service to participate. The local authority is a listening organisation, with practitioners and managers at all levels seeking and acting on the views of children and young people to further improve and develop services for children in care. This is evidenced in children's records, through the co-production of services and training delivered to frontline staff.

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

39. Personal advisers (PAs) are allocated and introduced to children in good time before they leave care, allowing for meaningful and trusting relationships to be formed early to support children's transition to adulthood.
40. Care leavers in Bury are very complimentary about their PAs, who support them to receive their rights and entitlements and to access the local offer. PAs speak proudly and show care and understanding about the young people they work with and who they visit regularly. The voice of the care leaver comes through in their written records, although the quality of these records does vary.
41. The quality of pathway plans has improved, making them more explicit about care leavers' views, wishes and entitlements. They are co-produced with young people, with some showing clear contingency planning and timescales for actions. Plans are not consistently joined up with the work of other professionals. This is a missed opportunity to ensure that care leavers receive appropriately focused support, and to know what to expect and from who, to help them meet their goals.
42. Many care leavers benefit from 'staying put' arrangements, affording them with stability and consistency and the opportunity to remain close to the people important to them. This is planned for at an early stage, allowing care leavers some certainty about their future and to enable them to take tentative steps towards independence at a pace that is right for them.
43. Most care leavers live in suitable accommodation in accordance with their needs and independence skills. They live in homes where they feel safe and have priority bidding through the housing pathway, so they are not left waiting too long for suitable housing. Care leavers are supported to develop the skills they need to live independently and successfully maintain their own tenancies. For

those with additional needs, options for supported accommodation are explored first.

44. Vulnerable care leavers at risk of exploitation are supported by PAs and other professionals to reduce such risks. A small number of care leavers do not have updated risk assessments as their needs change. As a result, not all care leavers are provided with specialist support from the contextual safeguarding team, which may mean risks are not fully understood.
45. Care leavers in custody benefit from consistent PAs who visit them regularly and know them well. For those young people in custody with the most complex needs, there is not always a timely follow through of escalation of concerns by their workers or managers to the prison service to ensure that their needs are met promptly and appropriately.
46. Care leavers who are parents are supported to prepare for the birth of their children and access a variety of universal services. PAs support young people with the equipment they need, and to access support services to help them prepare for the birth of their baby and beyond. As a result of this approach, care leavers are supported to be the best parents they can be.
47. Care leavers who were unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are helped to develop friendships and a sense of belonging in the local area. They are supported with their leave to remain applications to secure their future. PAs give due consideration to unaccompanied care leavers' identity, religious and cultural needs and help them to develop their language skills and to integrate into the community. Not all PAs are curious of the histories of care leavers who have left their homes abroad, with an over-reliance on the young person having to initiate and share these experiences. As a result, some care leavers are not getting the support they need to address potential past trauma.
48. Care leavers are provided with health histories, although it is not always clear to PAs where these are kept. PAs help their care leavers to access universal health services to promote their physical health needs, and to have access to a specialist nurse. There is a lack of specialist mental health services for care leavers, meaning that some do not get the help they need at the right time. More recently, care leavers have received access to counselling services, and a service to provide emotional well-being support is being set up. It is too soon to see the impact of this for care leavers.
49. Care leavers are supported by their PAs to engage in education, employment and training. There are increased initiatives to help more care leavers to participate in work experience, such as apprenticeships, and to enter higher education. Despite this, the results of these efforts remain mixed, especially for those care leavers aged 17 to 18, and too many currently are not in education, employment or training.

50. Care leavers receive a comprehensive local offer, which provides a wide range of financial support such as council tax exemptions (or this being paid, if living outside the area), driving lessons, gym membership, wi-fi and funding to set up their first home. The offer is widely available via the Bee Connected app and QR codes and is advertised at the new care leavers' hub, where care leavers can drop in for advice and support. PAs also talk to care leavers about the local offer. Some care leavers told us that they were not always updated about changes to the offer. Leaders are working collaboratively with young people to make this more accessible and flexible using modern digital technology.
51. Care leavers are consulted with and co-design services, including the creation of the care leavers' hub. Care leavers value this space, which is used informally for them to meet up with other young people. The hub also offers formal sessions, with a variety of support available in the hub. Some care leavers engage in the care leaver council, helping them to shape and influence service development, including the appointment of senior managers.
52. The support available to care leavers after the age of 21 remains in place unless they opt out. If they do, care leavers can readily access support should they need this in the future. This helps care leavers to navigate the ups and downs of life further into adulthood and is welcomed by the care leavers with whom inspectors spoke.

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

53. A respected, highly visible and effective senior leadership team, supported by corporate and political leaders with a shared priority to improve outcomes for children, has made significant improvements to practice since the last inspection in 2021. The leadership team is now a permanent and stable team, and this stability has increased the pace of change over the last year.
54. Leaders have developed a comprehensive and coherent improvement plan that is driving the necessary changes, and this is embraced by a whole council vision and by partner agencies. This incremental approach to delivering change across a number of services, supported by significant investment, has improved services for children.
55. The chief executive and lead member are impressively engaged in the improvement plan, providing necessary challenge when required. External support has been utilised well to provide effective, independent scrutiny and challenge. This has helped leaders to develop services and to have an accurate understanding of the quality of those services. As a result, leaders in the council are aware of the existing strengths and the areas for development that remain. Leaders have firm plans in place to address these areas.
56. The local authority acts as a committed and effective corporate parent with an understanding of what children need. The executive director is ambitious for

children and has been determined to ensure that all leaders and partner agencies understand what it is like to be a child in care. The voice of children has been used effectively and powerfully to energise various discussions with leaders to make changes. Notable achievements are the development of the care leavers' hub, and expanding the local offer for care leavers, ensuring that children who leave care are not disadvantaged.

57. Strategic partnerships are a strength. Leaders have worked with partner agencies and local businesses to create more opportunities for care leavers to get back into education or employment, including the provision of an increasing number of council apprenticeships.
58. Leaders in Bury have been able to make the necessary changes to frontline practice, but the impact remains inconsistent, mostly because of legacy issues such as high social worker turnover. There is an effective multi-agency response at the front door, with some strong assessments undertaken, and more recent overall practice demonstrates a significant improvement. The judiciary and Cafcass are positive about the quality of social work in Bury, with the voice of children a particular strength. This was evidenced throughout the inspection. The local authority knows there is further work to do with colleagues in schools to ensure that children's educational needs are met. Changes in the leadership team over time have hampered this work, but action is now being taken by the virtual school team to develop these relationships with school leaders and to be successful advocates for children.
59. Leaders are responding effectively to the sufficiency challenge. Financial investment has been approved to increase the number of local authority-owned residential homes. In addition, funding has been made available to provide a broad package of support to foster carers, and this funding has enabled services to be commissioned to help children move from residential care into foster homes. Greater stability for children in care in Bury is seen as a result.
60. The local authority's improvement journey has been beset with workforce challenges, and this has meant that the pace of change has not been as quick as leaders would have liked. Leaders have been resolute in their approach but have had to pause and reflect when needed. This was illustrated in the implementation of the family safeguarding model, which was halted to rectify quality issues and to adapt the pace for the workforce. While this was a difficult decision, this demonstrates the understanding leaders have of their workforce, and their aspirations to get it right for children.
61. Leaders have created an effective centralised approach to access resources. Workers value and recognise the resources now available for the children and families with whom they work. This centralised approach provides an effective oversight of the resources required and helps leaders to understand any unmet need and to forward plan.

62. The quality assurance framework has been redesigned. It is comprehensive and allows senior, corporate and political leaders to have a line of sight into the quality of practice and children's experiences. Leaders have progressed from an initial necessary focus on compliance to now focusing on quality and children's outcomes. Learning from audit activity is collated and delivered to practitioners via 'Teaching Tuesdays' or '7-minute briefings' to ensure that learning is effective and makes a difference. Practitioners informed us that they welcomed this approach, and improvements could be seen in practice.
63. Having a stable workforce has and continues to be a priority for leaders. This is supported by a whole-council approach. Bury has previously struggled to recruit permanent social workers. The use of agency workers has reduced significantly over time and there is now greater stability of social workers for children. More recently, stability in the workforce has been seen, with more people interested in working for the local authority because of successful media campaigns and practitioners converting from agency to permanent posts. Additionally, leaders have recruited social workers from overseas and further developed their own routes into social work. The positive culture and environment leaders have created is retaining staff who are being supported to develop and progress in their careers.
64. Workforce capacity has been strengthened. Financial investment has enabled additional teams to be created. The workforce has been vocal about the workload challenges over time, and leaders have responded to meet this need. As a result, caseloads have reduced, and practitioners stated that their workloads are now manageable.
65. Regular and appropriately focused training is provided for frontline staff and their managers. Newly qualified workers now benefit from a two-year supported programme and can progress in a timescale that is right for them. All workers with whom inspectors spoke stated they enjoyed working for Bury. They all reported that they felt supported and equipped to do their work, with their managers and senior leaders creating the right environment for them to improve their practice. Workers are supervised regularly by their managers, although the quality of this is inconsistent. Workers reported that they could see the positive impact of the changes made by leaders in their work.

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