

**Minutes of a meeting of the Children's Services
Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Wednesday,
27 September 2023 in Council Chamber - City Hall,
Bradford**

Commenced 4.30 pm
Concluded 6.46 pm

Present – Councillors

LABOUR	CONSERVATIVE	LIBERAL DEMOCRAT	BRADFORD INDEPENDENT GROUP
Alipoor (Alt) Mohammed Regan Thirkill Zaman	Davies Pollard	Sunderland	Sajawal

VOTING CO-OPTED MEMBERS:

Joyce Simpson
Shifa Simab

Church Representative (CE)
Parent Governor Representative

Observers: Councillor Duffy

Apologies: Tom Bright and Fauzia Raza

Councillor Davies in the Chair

13. DISCLOSURES OF INTEREST

No disclosures of interest in relation to items under consideration were received.

14. MINUTES

Resolved –

That the minutes of the meetings held on 1 February 2023 and 15 February 2023 be held as a correct record.

15. INSPECTION OF REPORTS AND BACKGROUND PAPERS

There were no appeals submitted by the public to review decisions to restrict documents.

16. REFERRALS TO THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

There were no referrals to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

17. BRADFORD CHILDREN'S SERVICES IMPROVEMENT PLAN

The Portfolio Holder for Children and Families introduced (**Document “B”**) and highlighted the importance of partnership working between the Bradford Children and Families Trust (BCFT), Bradford Local Authority Children’s Services, and other partners across the district. The Portfolio Holder added that the Improvement Plan would be regularly reviewed. The Chief Executive of Bradford Children and Families Trust provided the Committee with a brief overview of the report before the Chair invited Members to ask questions.

A Member of the Committee asked several questions about foster carers and if there were plans in place to increase the number of foster carers and how this might transpire. The Executive Director of Social Care and Practice stated that there had been success over recent months and that twelve potential foster carers were currently undergoing assessment and that many more people had expressed an interest. Members were told that work was being conducted that focussed on placement stability. It was added that fostering was being promoted through community groups and faith organisations to try and encourage more people to become foster carers.

A Member cited page 19 of the Improvement Plan Progress Report contained within **Document B** and noted the figures stated that there had been 35 new starters but 21 leavers, and asked why this was. The Chief Executive of BCFT acknowledged the issues with staff retention and stated that it was a work in progress. The Committee were informed that leavers were typically leaving for positive reasons such as promotions elsewhere rather than due to workload issues.

The Chief Executive of BCFT was asked about the Homes Regulatory Compliance review and whether the review was routine. The Committee were informed that homes were inspected on a yearly basis. The Strategic Director for Children’s Services added that homes are now overseen by the trust.

A Member asked about ‘embedded conversations’ that were mentioned in the report and asked what this meant in relation to the Integrated Front Door.

Members were told that the purpose was to address any concerns and direct families in the right direction to ensure the correct support was provided. Officers explained that the Integrated Front Door (IFD) played a crucial role in the safeguarding system in Bradford. The Executive Director of Social Care and Practice stated that collaborative work between key partners was essential to provide an efficient Front Door. The Assistant Director of Children's Services informed the Committee that the approach to IFD was based on research from Professor David Thorpe.

Officers were asked about the process of how matters not directly related to Front Door were tracked. Officers explained that in such an instance the matter would be tracked through Early Help hubs and the necessary support would be offered. It was added that there were also links to partner agencies as well as schools and health practitioners which provided a joined-up approach. Members were informed that data was reviewed regularly to monitor how many calls result in early intervention.

A Member of the Committee asked about the recruitment of international social workers and was told that the recruitment of social workers was a national problem hence the need to recruit from abroad for experienced social workers. Officers assured Members that all those recruited went through the necessary training and that their qualifications were compliant for social work in England.

Members asked several questions about Early Help. The Chief Executive of BCFT stated that Early Help was functioning well and that a number of posts had recently been filled, the Chief Executive also expressed hopes to invest more in Early Help in the future as it could reduce costs down the line and reduce the necessity for future interventions. The accessibility of some of the Early Help hubs and what provision existed for families unable to access a site was queried. Officers acknowledged the issues of accessibility due to the wide geographic area that Bradford covers combined with the expense of travel during the cost-of-living crisis. The Committee were informed that satellite drop-in sessions were available in addition to online activities and that recruitment of 'family navigators' had taken place with their work focussed on families who have difficulty accessing services or hubs. Concerns were raised regarding pressurised budgets and the sustainability of the hubs and the impact any cuts in services might have.

Members asked about school attendance figures and whether it would be possible to incorporate more detail into future improvement plans, particularly surrounding emotion-based school avoidance. The Strategic Director of Children's Services told Members that this could be done and shared positive news that following work around emotion-based school avoidance the Department for Education had agreed to a grant to develop this work further. Officers were asked about any trends in attendance data and explained that the Education Improvement Board would have more specific data, such as in relation to specific cohorts, particular schools or vulnerable groups, and that the data was monitored closely and shared regularly with the Bradford Children and Families Trust. The Committee were told that severe and persistent absence levels remained higher than pre-Covid levels.

A Member asked about waiting times for children with disabilities specifically in relation to EHCP's. The Strategic Director of Children's Services explained that

the SEND Statement of Action which would be a report coming to the Committee later in the year would provide a lot more details around waiting times, however for the third year running the Local Authority was meeting the statutory requirement and that waiting times were in fact slightly less than the national average. Members were told that the Local Authority was processing EHCP's faster than a number of other authorities.

The Chief Executive of BCFT was asked about staffing particularly what progress had been made reducing agency workers and bringing on permanent staff, and what the level of staff retention was. The Chief Executive told the Committee that recruitment was becoming more successful as there were a growing number of applications and lots of interest for recently advertised roles which could translate to more permanent staff and a reduction in agency staff. Members were also told that the Trust would not support permanent members of staff leaving the Trust to become agency workers and in such an instance they would not return to work in Bradford. The Committee were informed that the number of agency social workers was currently 219 and that more details could be shared about staff retention levels in the future. When asked if this was the total number of agency workers the Chief Executive explained that figures were constantly changing and that this did not include agency workers in other roles so the figure was closer to 265 agency staff working across social care.

Officers were asked if future reports and improvement plans could incorporate benchmarking so that it would be possible to compare progress and data with statistical neighbours. Officers acknowledged that this could be beneficial and that it would be possible to include in future reports.

A Member asked about the accessibility of social workers which had been identified as an issue in past cases. Officers explained that if a social worker left the authority, then a new social worker was immediately identified for the family so that a new contact was available and other partners such as schools would be informed of this.

Resolved –

- (1) That this Committee would like to thank officers for their attendance.**
- (2) That this Committee requests that future Children's Services Improvement Plan report contain a RAG, (Red, Amber, Green), rating.**

ACTION: Chief Executive Officer for Bradford Children and Families Trust

(Ruth Terry – ruth.terry@bradfordcft.org.uk)

The Committee acknowledged the work programme and were told by the Scrutiny Lead that sessions and site visits were being arranged for Members. There was a discussion in relation to potential areas of work in Children's Services that could be explored, specifically Members asked if it would be possible to incorporate items related to home to school transport and a school holiday activity programme into the work programme.

Resolved –

That the Committee discussed and amended the work programme and agreed to include the following topics into the work programme:

- (1) School Holiday and Activity Programme;**
- (2) Home School Transport.**

ACTION: Overview & Scrutiny Lead.

(Mustansir Butt – 07582 101597)

Chair

Note: These minutes are subject to approval as a correct record at the next meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

THESE MINUTES HAVE BEEN PRODUCED, WHEREVER POSSIBLE, ON RECYCLED PAPER