



Department
for Education

Department for Education
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Kersten England
Chief Executive
Bradford Council

By email

10 August 2020

Dear Kersten

DfE PROGRESS REVIEW: 28 July 2020

We would like firstly to thank the Children's Services team for organising a very useful programme of meetings on the 28 July which for the first time we ran on a virtual basis. We do understand the amount of time and effort it takes to allow us to meet with so many staff and colleagues and we are grateful to all those who gave up their time to participate. As always, these diverse discussions with social workers, team managers and representatives from the partners adds a valuable dimension to our overall picture of progress. We were also provided with a number of reports in preparation for the review and we will provide our views on these as part of this feedback also.

We committed to providing written feedback of our general findings and recommendations, which we largely covered in our verbal feedback session on 10 August.

General Findings

Overall, we took away numerous positives away from the review and it now feels as if many of the foundations are finally in place for improvement. We also heard the corporate centre report of working more closely and collaboratively with children's services. This was an area that we had picked up on in previous reviews and so we will continue to test this and encourage the increased challenge now provided by Councillor Farley to senior executives. We acknowledged that the improvement journey had been impacted by Covid-19 and that pace and scale of improvement would be considered in light of the pandemic.

Partners reported strengthened working practices and relationships and more collaborative working. They welcomed a more stable leadership team which now felt less disjointed to work with and improved the communications between agencies. There remained some minor concerns in the differences in some of the ways of working with locality teams but this did not hamper the input provided by the partners. We were unclear as to whether some of this activity has come about due to Covid 19 or regular improvement activity but partners were keen to see lessons learned from recent operations and to sustain the positives. One quote from the group which I am keen to share with you is,

“There have been significant moves forward of partners wrapping around children and not reverting into statutory silos.”

This quote seemed to embody the mood of the partners and it was clear that previous tensions had been resolved since the last review in November 2019 and that all partners felt they were working well together.

The two focus groups with middle managers, social workers and ASYEs both reported many encouraging aspects. They described the leadership team as inspirational, helped by a permanent group of Heads of Service now being in post, with rapid changes being experienced in the last six months. They held very high regard for the practice supervisors who are being recruited into post, providing support and greater opportunities for reflective supervision. Their recruitment to these non-case holding positions was seen as being pivotal to improving quality of practice. The Improvement Board will monitor the recruitment and deployment of the remainder of the planned staffing complement of this group of staff and measure their impact over time. This group also welcomed the introduction of the practice standards which were described as replacing previously unwritten rules which changed depending on the team manager in post. Many in the groups felt that they had been included in the consultation of the practice standards which certainly appears to have aided their acceptance, visibility and use. The groups were less clear as to whether the practice standards would be used to monitor performance during supervision sessions.

Supervision was described as an improving picture over the last 6-9 months, however this is not supported by an electronic recording system of participation and actions which all agreed would assist greatly. An IT system was described (alongside other IT elements) as being in the ‘queue,’ but it was not clear as to the priority of this development.

We also heard mixed views on the audit process with some describing the current manual process as lengthy and repetitive. We know from audit reports that compliance and timeliness of audits is a major concern. There was some confusion over whether it would be better to update and amend the current audit tool or to wait until an electronic database could be launched. Again, the notion of the IT solution being in a ‘queue’ was described. The audit process had only just been launched at our last review in November and as yet does not seem to be providing the required results. A solution needs to be rapidly considered as the constancy of audits and acting on the resulting corrective actions will have a huge influence on improved quality of practice.

Finally, from this group we heard about the challenges being experienced from the limitations of the IT hardware and system. Learning and development is limited although we understand that an e-learning platform has been commissioned. What was less clear was how long this will take to populate with modules and rolled out to staff. This was deemed as essential as social workers continue to work from home. Additionally, we were advised as to the lack of video conferencing capability available to social workers which hindered their interactions with team members as well as their families. All confirmed that video was available on their laptop but that either they were not able to utilise this function, or that the connection was interrupted (if being used via their mobile device) when an incoming call was received. Their mobile then only allowed them to decline the call without being able to forward to voicemail or pick up if they needed to.

We also spoke to colleagues specifically involved in Early Help and schools. We heard about the Early Help coordinators now in post but that there remained some confusion among partners about the scope of their role. Communications, especially around early help, needs to be timely and concise if this service is to assist in further reductions in referrals to the Front Door and at a time when many children will be going back into schools after a prolonged period at home.

Next Steps

Overall, we were presented with a positive view of progress and an improved culture within Bradford's Children's Services, and many foundations now appear in place to support the pace of improvement currently expected. However, during the review there were a number of topics that were discussed within the focus groups which would assist further. These areas for focus appear to fall into two categories: HR and IT.

Taking HR first, we acknowledge the success of recruitment to senior positions and are aware of ongoing recruitment campaigns, but this does not detract from agency numbers still being incredibly high in Bradford's children's services. We would hope with the stability now being created from the leadership team and heads of service that Bradford is in a better position to attract more permanent members of staff. This statement would appear to be supported by some recent successful recruitment campaigns; however, this needs to be supplemented by a **robust recruitment and retention policy** which we understand to be in train. Again, we want to stress the importance of expediting this policy so that social workers are incentivised, by a range of means, to stay and develop their career with Bradford. We feel that this also needs to be supported by a **supervision policy** so social workers can be challenged on practice and supported in their role. Furthermore, we are still to see the recruitment of business support workers to assist the children's services workforce with some of the more administrative activities which are taking up too much time.

It is also clear from the Vital signs report that sickness is increasing amongst social work staff but that this problem is compounded by the incredibly poor management of sickness absence cases. You have identified that you need to improve in this area and listed a number of activities to improve the statistics. We cannot stress enough the importance of prioritising this activity and one that should continue to be monitored via the Improvement Board.

It is clear from previous conversations that IT issues can be resolved but there continues a steady stream of demands placed on this vital central service. We heard of both the need for an **electronic audit system** and **electronic recording of supervision participation and actions**, but it was not clear of their priority in the IT 'queue.' If children services is to be supported by the whole council then both of these systems need to be prioritised if improvement in quality of practice is to be achieved. This is coupled with ongoing improvements to a range of **updated/new e-forms** on the ICS system.

Additionally, our final IT points have no doubt arisen due to the pandemic and the need for the vast majority of the children's workforce to be able to function from home. We heard of the commissioning of the **e-learning platform** but were unsure of the timescales for the population and roll-out. The importance of this will no doubt increase if working from home for a proportion of the staff continues. This is also in line with the need for staff to engage with their families and teams whilst working from home but complicated by either the lack of, or difficulties of using **video technology**. We would welcome a quick investigation as to whether video technology can be rolled-out to all staff who require it from laptops rather than mobile phones where we heard of interruptions caused by incoming telephone calls.

We acknowledged the amount of work that has been undertaken by Bradford to get to its current position but also want to be clear on the amount of work still required. We hope that some of the suggestions will go part way to see an improvement in the quality of practice which now needs to become the focus of the improvement journey, supported by robust HR policies and IT which functions well for all staff.

I am copying this letter to Mark Douglas, Cllr Susan Hinchcliffe and Cllr Adrian Farley.

Yours sincerely



Mark Taylor

Regional Head (North)

Children's Services Improvement and Interventions Unit