

# Report of the Deputy Director of Children's Services to the meeting of the Children's Overview & Scrutiny Committee to be held on 29<sup>th</sup> July 2021

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## A

### Subject:

**Ofsted Monitoring Visit - 28-29 April 2021 (Help and Protection)**

### Summary statement:

Following the full Inspection of Children's Social Care Services from the 17 to 28 September 2018, the fifth of a series of Monitoring Visits took place on the 28 to 29 April 2021.

The findings were published by Ofsted on 4 June 2021.

### EQUALITY & DIVERSITY:

There are no direct implications for equality and diversity arising from this report. Children's Services have a duty to ensure that vulnerable children and families have their holistic needs addressed in a non-judgemental manner.

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### Portfolio:

**Children & Families**

### Overview & Scrutiny Area:

**Children & Families**

## 1. SUMMARY

Following Ofsted's Inspection of Children's Social Care Services from the 17 to 28 September 2018, the fifth of a series of Monitoring Visits took place on the 28 to 29 April 2021.

## 2. BACKGROUND

The letter recognises the difficulty of delivering services throughout the pandemic and the creative efforts to which social workers have gone to maintain service delivery.

Ofsted acknowledge that since the main inspection in 2018, a new permanent senior leadership team is in place and is driving improvement. This team is supported and challenged by an improvement board chaired by an improvement Advisor appointed by the Department of Education.

The improvement to date has transformed the basic infrastructure of the service, leading to an improved front door service, a revamped training programme, improved quality assurance and performance management and significant financial investment to increase social work and managerial capacity.

### IMPACT OF LEADERS

Ofsted have found that the pace of improvement is still too slow for children and families. They do however recognise that this has been exacerbated by the breadth of the inadequacy and challenges associated with maintaining service delivery during the pandemic.

Following the appointment of the Director of Children's Services in July 2019 and the appointment of the Deputy Director in November 2019, the following measures have been implemented to increase resilience and capacity in the service and ensure that the foundations for our improvement journey are firm:

- Strengthened leadership and management structure by completing the recruitment of permanent established Head of Services and Service Managers posts which are all now filled. This provides stability for the service but also introduces technical knowledge and experience.
- A full end to end review of the staffing establishment across Children's Social Care was completed and has led to the creation of a demand-led structure from 1st April 2021. This structure recognises the significant increase of demand in recent years and has resulted in further investment of £7.25m.
- Researched, consulted and wrote our Practice Model (Appendix 2) which is aligned to the Signs of Safety approach, but underpinned by practitioners developing an understanding of the impact of trauma and promoting the importance of relationships for children and families. We launched and initiated the implementation model in March 2021 and supported by a detailed training plan.

- We have developed Practice Standards (Appendix 3), Practice Guidance, and updated core social work policies and procedures. These documents can now all be accessed through our unique online procedures page at <https://bradfordchildcare.proceduresonline.com/index.html>
- We have launched a new supervision model and audit framework to further strengthen reflective practice.
- Successful succession planning has enabled permanent social workers to progress in their careers, introducing increasing levels of experience and skill in the system. Both these developments are very new, although there is already some positive impact, which can be seen in some children's cases.
- Drive learning and improvement by recruiting Practice Supervisors and Community Resource workers who are now in post for all teams.
- We have launched our mocking bird family model of foster care to enhance support networks for our carers and quality of care afforded to children looked after.
- Implemented a service restructure by successfully realigning to Duty & Assessment teams, Child and Family teams and Children in Care teams.
- Increased capacity by mobilising 4 fixed term COVID recovery teams in Duty and Assessment and 5 experienced fixed term Child and Family teams, this has reduced the number of staff with high caseloads from 30% to 20% in the last month.
- In partnership with colleagues across Health, we developed The Integrated Covid Outreach team which was mobilised to complete safe and well visits to vulnerable children across the District. This was seen as an example of good practice and innovation recognised in the feedback below;

*“BDCFT Community Children’s Services would like to take the opportunity to thank you for all your support in the establishment and day to day running of the children’s integrated Covid 19 team. The team has meant that hard to reach children and families have been able to be visited by health and children’s social care professionals during the height of the Covid pandemic, whilst considering both the safety of staff and families. This has been a fantastic example of multiagency working during a really challenging time.*

*The plan was for the team to continue up until the end of June 2021 and now that Covid restrictions have lessened and requests for visits have ceased the team will be stepped down – knowing that we can re-mobilise if needed, as processes and learning from the team are now in place.*

## **QUALITY OF PRACTICE**

### **Strategy Meetings and Section 47 investigations**

Inspectors noted that when risks to children escalate, strategy meetings are timely and there is good participation and information-sharing by partner agencies. A clear statement for next steps is made, children’s interim safety is considered and

actions determined. The subsequent section 47 enquiries include multi-agency information and the views of parents and, in some cases, the wider family. Children are seen and spoken to, to ascertain their views, facilitating effective decision-making about next steps. This confirms that the positive practice in strategy meetings and section 47 enquiries seen at the assurance focused visit in December 2020 has been maintained.

There is also more recent evidence of the child protection chairs raising appropriate challenge to the social workers when practice falls below expected standards. Inspectors identified that there is drift in relation to interventions and services not being delivered quickly enough following an initial assessment.

It is important to recognise the increased volume of case work which has had an inevitable impact upon the timely completion single assessments following a new referral. This was noted in our self-assessment as an area for improvement and the following measures were introduced:

- Refreshed performance and activity reports - these are sent to each Head of Service every Monday to support more effective management of performance.
- Set out clear Case planning and permanence tracking meetings guide (Appendix 4).
- Introduced Early Help and family support panels in each locality service to facilitate a timely and safe step down for children and families who no longer require statutory social work support.

OFSTED reported that the interim multi-agency safety plans are not routinely in place to bridge the gap between the outcome of the Section 47 investigation and the Initial Child Protection Conference.

- In March and April 2021, we received almost double the expected number of requests for an Initial Child Protection Conference. Although the system is designed to be able to flex with increased demand, this increase was unprecedented and has created a huge challenge for us and our partners in terms of the capacity to hold these meetings and maintain the statutory quorum. In response to this demand, two additional child protection conference chairs have been recruited.
- Ahead of the Monitoring Visit taking place, we reported that for the reasons set out above, the timeliness (15 working days) from Strategy Meeting to an Initial Child Protection conference reduced to 60% from a high of 90%. For the 6-month period covered by the monitoring visit, there were 167 late Initial Child Protection Conferences. 81.3% of the children were seen in the period between the request for the conference being triggered and it taking place.
- Interim safety plans will be agreed with the family and professionals at the conclusion of the Section 47 investigation in the event that the decision is to proceed to a child protection conference.
- The conversion rate for children presented to an Initial Child Protection Conference and being made subject to a plan has remained steady at 95%.

This highlights that the right thresholds are being applied for children at risk of significant harm. Our data tells us that our “conversion rate” is consistent. This means that the vast majority of Initial CP Conferences result in a multi-agency decision to implement a Child Protection Plan. Despite the increase in overall numbers, maintaining the conversation rate would suggest the application of the statutory threshold has remained consistent.

## **Assessments**

Inspectors identified how a significant number of assessments are new assessments on open children’s cases. This is as a result of assessments being updated every six months which demonstrates good practice. These updated assessments are proportionate and include all the adults of the family.

Inspectors recognised since February the very recent newly commissioned agency social work teams have incrementally been introduced, increasing social work capacity by 50 practitioners. These teams are beginning to have a positive impact for some children. Where there has been drift and delay, assessments are now leading to clear and focused planning, and children are beginning to make progress.

Inspectors reported that assessments include the child’s voice, although their unique and diverse needs, identity and culture are not routinely considered in order to understand the child’s world and their lived experience. A new Bradford Assessment toolkit has been developed as an aid for all social workers completing assessments. The tool kit supports practitioners to think about the child’s journey, how to illicit information and triangulate this to prevent over-optimism. This also supports a more proportionate and analytical conclusion which is purposeful when considering the plan and next steps for a child.

In addition to this, the Participation and Voice group is starting to generate ideas and we are now in the process of recruiting a Participation Coordinator to develop this work across all of our services. This will ensure children and young people are able to influence and shape their journeys going forward.

Although there is much progress still to be made in terms of capturing the child’s voice, we know the impact and influence of the practice standards has resulted in;

- Some excellent examples of children being supported to share their feelings e.g. the worry lion, 3 houses, advocacy.
- Children and young peoples’ needs and wishes are being considered in case work and this is being evidenced through case audits.
- We can also see emerging evidence of the child’s voice and experience being presented within reports to Legal Gateway Panel.
- Children and young people are being consulted on core documents and changes in social care practice

Inspectors identified delays in the completion of assessments leading to delays in the identification of risk, need and early intervention. Where risks are identified, this does not always result in the timely progression to an initial child protection conference and, if needed, resultant multi-agency protection plans.

The introduction of the new social work service structure has enabled managers within the Duty and Assessment teams to strengthen the quality and timeliness of assessments. The Duty and Assessment operational management group with membership from all localities continues to meet monthly to drive improvement. The group evaluate quality, performance and share best practice across all locality teams. This supports a wider understanding of trends, themes and improves quality internally. Health and police partners have joined this operational management group from June 21<sup>st</sup> 2021. Whilst still in the infancy of change, the positive impact for children, families and staff is now being seen within the data and performance evidenced by May's reporting figures below;

- The Integrated Front Door have continued to make timely decisions for children at the point contacts are received into the service. In May and June 21, on average 85% of contacts reached a decision in 1 working day. This is the highest it has been over a 12 month period.
- The performance for assessments completed within 45-day statutory timescale has improved from 70% in April to 77% in June.
- The performance around review assessments remains outstanding and over 94% of children open to the service have had a review assessment at a minimum of every 6 months. This evidences how assessments for children who need longer term support are continuous, ongoing and not one off events.
- A review has been undertaken of our 'Step Down' to Early Help pathway which is now more efficient and streamlined. This has reduced the number of open cases with no active involvement by a Social Worker and ensures children receive support from the right service at the right time.

The considerable increase in referrals has been a challenge during the pandemic. In recognition of this, additional funding has been secured to provide fixed term teams in all localities. This will support the Council's 'COVID' recovery and will help to safely manage increased service demand. This additional resource ensures that children in need of services are seen and assessments continue to be completed in a timely way. For those children who have not had an assessment completed within the timescale set by the manager, checkpoint processes are in place to ensure that they have been seen, are safe and have a clear safety plan in place.

## **Plans**

Inspectors reported clear evidence of improved plans which are simple and targeted to specific areas. Inspectors saw a range of work which addressed identified unmet needs for children as well as Social Workers benefiting from a range of resources to deliver the plan for the child. The impact of our investment in Community Resource Workers (1 per team) was demonstrated and this is contributing to an improvement in children's circumstances.

There was variability in how Child Protection Plans were being used to affect change and prevent drift. For some children, Child Protection plans weren't visible on file or required updating. To address these concerns we have;

- Revisions to our Performance Management system allow us to capture any children with an absent or overdue plan. These are tracked twice-weekly by the management group so areas of focus are transparent. A weekly performance management meeting is chaired by Service Managers where and drift is addressed and timescales for completion are agreed. This is overseen by Heads of Service to ensure plans are progressed for children in a timely way. Recent audit activity identified how 26% of plans were SMART and graded 'Good' in both quality and impact for children.
- Children's participation in meetings is a key focus of the reviewing service and provisions are being explored to ensure children regularly contribute to their own plans. In addition to this, our advocacy offer is being reviewed so that plans are child friendly and we can effectively capture the child's voice through pictures and direct work.
- Our Child Protection Coordinators have a defined escalation process which is now well embedded and prevents delays for children on plans. Only 2% of children have been subject to a Child Protection Plan for over 2 years and this relates to 7 families. There is management footprint on these records and plans are in place to prevent any further delay. Audit data has identified that the footprint of the Conferencing and Reviewing service is more evident on children's records.
- The number of children subject to a second Child Protection plan within 12 months remains lower than our statistical neighbour average. Nevertheless, we continue to review the circumstances for these children through audit activity. Recent practice guidance sets out key areas for all Social Workers and Managers to consider when requesting a repeat Child Protection plan.

Inspectors felt Initial Child Protection plans were too long and complex for parents to understand. Conference chairs are working on reducing the length of plans so that they are clear and concise. A significant focus has been on looking at the use of language to enable parents and families to understand clearly what needs to happen to reduce risk. Investment has been made to increase capacity within the conferencing service which is designed to reduce caseloads and heighten the quality of Child Protection plans. An additional permanent manager position has been recruited to and agency conference chairs are being offered temporary contracts to manage demand.

Inspectors identified how some Child Protection plans were closed prematurely and resulted in needs remaining unmet for children. A recent audit in April 2021 identified that in 81.7% of cases stepped down were considered proportionate. The audit highlighted examples of contingency planning if further incidents occurred. Joint visits between Social Workers and Early Help workers are being undertaken within our Duty Teams to ensure emerging vulnerabilities are responded to at the earliest possible stage.

## **Engagement**

Inspectors saw evidence of creative direct work where children's voices and lived experiences were effectively captured. Social workers have continued to see children face to face and in May, 90% of children subject to Child Protection Plans were seen in person. The number of children visited face to face has been increasing since January 21 and is in line with our practice guidance.

The Pandemic has impacted consistency in this area and some children have not received regular visits in line with their presenting needs. Compliance with statutory visiting requirements continues to be tracked in weekly performance management meetings.

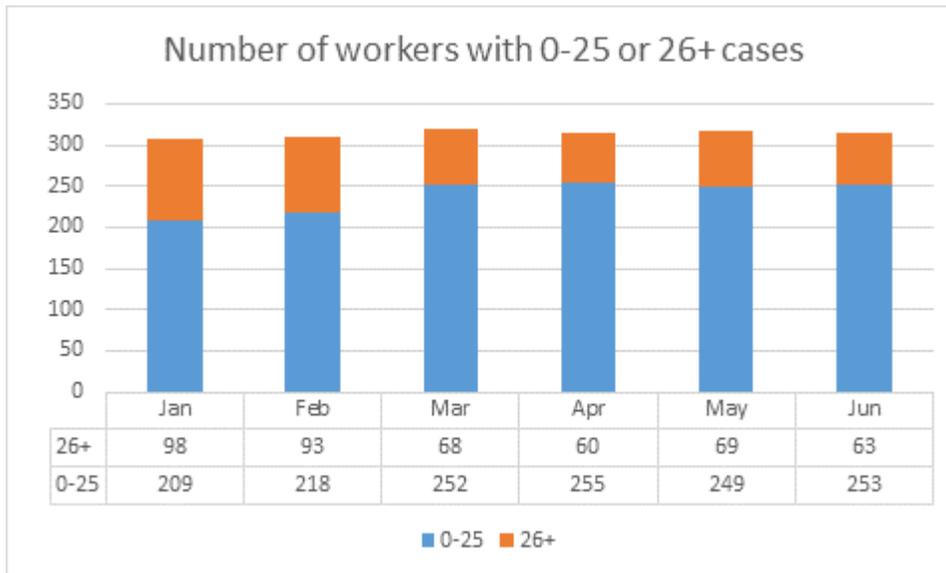
Fathers and extended family members are engaged in work but when they are living out of the family home, this was limited. We have enhanced our training offer in relation to hidden fathers to ensure all fathers are communicated and engaged with in relation to their children's plans.

The involvement of wider family and support networks needed to take place earlier when delivering interventions. We continue to promote the use of our FGC service to ensure families are engaged at the earliest opportunity.

## **Caseloads**

Inspectors reported that the changes of social workers have impacted on building meaningful relationships before direct work can take place. The staffing turnover within the service has been felt by other professional and agencies. In response to this we have taken the following action;

- A significant investment has been made to secure 5 additional fixed term teams across the locality areas. The final team commenced on 07.02.2021 and we are starting to see the impacts of this for both staff and children. The fixed term teams have provided 29 additional SWs, although the number of vacant posts across the directorate far exceeds these 29 posts. The chart below shows that the number of workers with more than 25 cases has reduced from 98 to 63. Whilst there is further work to do in this area, caseloads are more manageable than they were six months ago. The percentage of workers with a caseload of over 26 has reduced from 32% in January to 20% in June 21.



A Business case has been agreed to invest in wider advertising / recruitment marketing channels (e.g. Community Care, BASW, Jobs Go Public). This includes the creation of a dedicated social work recruitment microsite which will launch in May/June 2021. There will be greater use of social media and programmatic channels to target level 3 social workers alongside the recent appointment of a recruiter to solely focus on the recruitment of Level 3 Social Workers.

Focused research is underway to understand perceptions of Bradford, salary comparator data and general regional trends to assist our recruitment efforts. We have developed a Workforce Development Board that meets fortnightly to consider recruitment, attrition, agency spend, sickness, social media campaigns, workloads and capacity versus the establishment for FY21/22.

### **Recording Practices**

Inspectors highlighted that the strongest cases are those where pen pictures are completed by children and are child focused. Case summaries are visible on most files and evidence an improving picture. Recording of visits is variable; at best they are purposeful and show the child's voice, others are perfunctory. In order to support consistency in this area, we have developed recording guidance and undertake regular dip sampling to uplift the quality of practice across the service.

### **Private Fostering Arrangements (see appendix)**

Private fostering is defined in the Children Act 1989 as an arrangement made for the care of a child or young person under the age of 16 (under 18 if disabled) by someone other than a parent, person with parental responsibility or close relative (close relatives, step-parent, siblings, siblings of a parent and grandparents) for 28 days or more in their carer's home. In a Private Fostering arrangement, the parent retains parental responsibility for the child or young person.

At the time of the visit we had 5 children in private fostering arrangements. The inspectors did not suggest that these arrangements were unsafe, in fact all 5 children remain with their carer. The comment in relation police checks not being undertaken is specifically in respect of one child where the DBS had not been obtained, however local police checks were completed. Inspectors report that the practice issues noted within the letter are already well understood. They are noted in the Private Fostering Annual report and subsequent action plan to further improve practice in this area.

## **QUALITY ASSURANCE**

Inspectors identified that quality assurance and management oversight has continued to improve over the last six months, giving leaders a clearer line of sight to practice. The audit tool has been improved to include both compliance and quality of practice. This is strengthened through a moderation process from the quality assurance team.

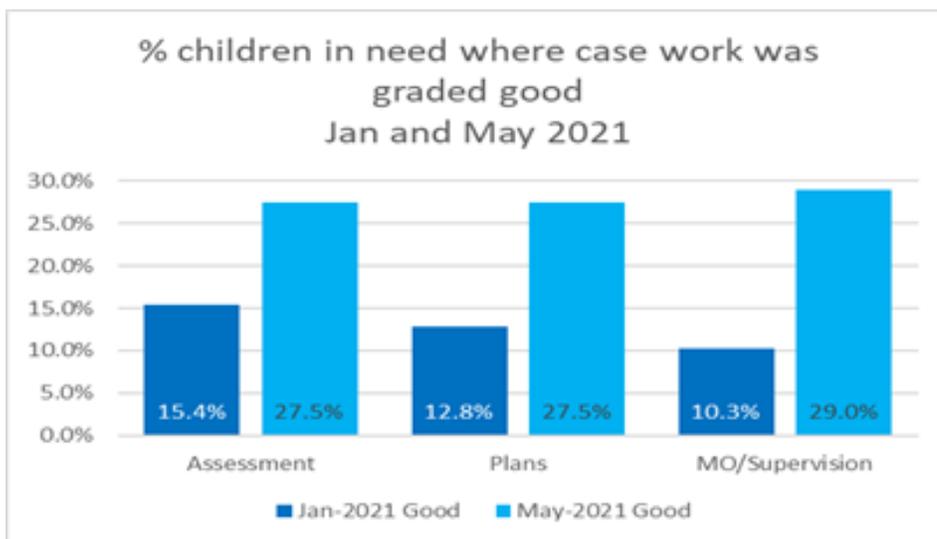
Since March 2021, we have embedded a systematic approach to learning by embedding practice months. This supported a collective learning culture in Bradford by responding to the outcomes of audits, Ofsted findings, complaints, exit interviews and service user feedback. Each month is focused on key practice areas for both practitioners and managers. Learning is promoted through a variety of approaches which has included workshops, reflective learning, team meeting learning and bite size information that is sent on weekly basis by the Principle Social Worker. The training has reinforced expectations regarding practice standards and practice guides to improve the quality of our service.

A key component of the approach is the use of reflective conversations with Practice Supervisors. Each month Practice Supervisors will undertake a one to one reflective discussion with the social worker regarding the practice issue, linking it to case work. So for example, case recording – the Practice Supervisor and Social Worker have a discussion regarding the quality of the case recording whilst dip sampling live cases. This approach has identified strengths and areas of development, whilst reinforcing the practice standards.

## **Audits**

Governance of all audits have now been centralised under the Quality Assurance Team. Audit themes are captured and shared with the workforce and are used to inform future training events.

Our audit compliance rates have continued to improve with 91% of audits being completed and returned in May. The senior leadership team continue to stress the importance of audits and the crucial role they play in service improvement. In order to demonstrate distance travelled, audits outcomes for Children in Need in May were compared with earlier audits undertaken in January. The findings evidence an improving picture and detail and detail how the number of records graded 'Good' has almost doubled.



### **Conclusion**

The findings from the most recent Ofsted Monitoring Visit are broadly in line with our self-assessment. The council's improvement plan already identifies the plans in place to strengthen practice in specific areas. A series of operational groups meet regularly to plan, implement and review identified service improvements. Alongside this, we have a number of live work streams which are led by Heads of Service to ensure momentum is maintained. The impact of these systems is detailed within the most recent self-assessment and improvement plan.

Whilst there is much more to be done, improvements have continued to accelerate during the Pandemic and reassuringly, the Ofsted findings are in line with the Council's self-assessment.

### **3. OTHER CONSIDERATIONS**

3.1 None to note.

### **4. FINANCIAL & RESOURCE APPRAISAL**

4.1 As cited in the enclosed letter, there are likely to be some resource implications in view of the of additional social work capacity created within the service.

### **5. RISK MANAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE ISSUES**

5.1 The Children's Services Improvement Board continues to monitor progress and will ensure that effective responses are made to all Ofsted's recommendations and DfE required improvements. The Children's Services Improvement Board focuses on outcomes for children and provides the drive and focus to ensure that necessary improvements are achieved and evidenced.

### **6. LEGAL APPRAISAL**

6.1 The inspection in September 2018 was undertaken under the new Framework, Evaluation Criteria and Inspector Guidance for the Inspections of Local Authority

Children's Services (ILACS). This contains provisions regarding actions to be taken after an inadequate inspection report. These include monitoring by Ofsted including an action planning visit, quarterly monitoring visits and a re-inspection, and also an action plan prepared by the local authority within 70 days of receiving the report.

- 6.2 On 4 December 2018, following the Secretary of State's decision to take a non-statutory approach in Bradford's case, the DFE issued an Improvement notice to the council, requiring the council to take a number of actions to address all areas of improvement identified in the Ofsted report. The notice also provides for DFE reviews of progress against the improvement agenda.

## **7. OTHER IMPLICATIONS**

### **7.1 SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS**

Not applicable.

### **7.2 GREENHOUSE GAS EMISSIONS IMPACTS**

Not applicable.

### **7.3 COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS**

Not applicable.

### **7.4 HUMAN RIGHTS ACT**

Not applicable.

### **7.5 TRADE UNION**

Consultation with trade unions continues around structures and budgets. Caseloads continue to be monitored by management.

### **7.6 WARD IMPLICATIONS**

The Improvement Notice and Improvement Plan affect all Wards, due to the Inadequate Judgement.

### **7.7 IMPLICATIONS FOR CORPORATE PARENTING**

In addition to the improvements identified, further areas of improvement are also necessary within our children in care and care leavers services.

### **7.8 ISSUES ARISING FROM PRIVACY IMPACT ASSESMENT**

None; both the Notice to Improve and Ofsted report have been published on their respective websites and are therefore in the public domain.

## **8. NOT FOR PUBLICATION DOCUMENTS**

8.1 Not applicable.

**9. OPTIONS**

9.1 Not applicable.

**10. RECOMMENDATIONS**

10.1 Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee are asked to note the contents of the letter from OFSTED.

**11. APPENDICES**

11.1 Appendix 1 – Ofsted Report of the Monitoring Visit 28 to 29 April 2021.  
Appendix 2 – Practice Model  
Appendix 3 – Practice Standards  
Appendix 4 – Case Planning Guide

**12. BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS**

12.1 None.