

13 December 2023

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cc Charlotte Ramsden, Chief Executive Officer, Bradford Children and Families Trust

Dear Marium

Monitoring visit to Bradford children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Bradford children's services on 8 and 9 November 2023. This was the second monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in January 2023, and the tenth monitoring visit since Bradford children's services was judged inadequate in 2018. Bradford children's services transferred to Bradford Children and Families Trust (the Trust) on 1 April 2023. This is the second monitoring visit under the new arrangements. His Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Matt Reed and Catherine Heron.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- Child in need and child protection planning.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. Inspectors were primarily on site.

Headline findings

This visit focused on child in need assessment and planning and child protection practice. There are early signs of some improved practice in child in need and child protection work since the last inspection. A new practice model is being implemented but is not yet fully embedded. The long history of inadequate practice means there continue to be a very high number of children who are subject to statutory child in need and child protection plans, many unnecessarily so. This has also resulted in drift and delay for some children having their needs and risks identified and responded to in a timely way. The Trust has a detailed understanding of the issues

that need improvement in this area of practice, which is enabling more targeted and recent improvement activity.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Senior leaders within the Trust, alongside those within the council, provided a very detailed self-evaluation of the current situation and future improvement plans for children in need and those subject to child protection planning. This mirrored what inspectors found during this visit. There are several new initiatives which are being implemented intended to improve practice and children's experiences. Many of these initiatives are relatively new. Senior leaders acknowledge that these have yet to have a significant impact on wider practice.

Improved performance data and quality assurance activity are providing leaders with a detailed understanding of practice quality. Thematic audits and dip sampling supplement case file audits, but case file audit completion rate is low. Social workers are not routinely involved in case audits, which limits their learning from this activity. It is acknowledged by senior leaders within the Trust that the quality assurance framework needs revisiting to ensure that it is contributing to practice improvement.

There are a very high number of children subject to child in need and child protection plans. Historical and less effective assessment and planning has resulted in some children and families being subject to statutory child protection or child in need procedures when alternative and more proportionate plans could have been considered. The Trust is working with staff and partner agencies to redress this and ensure that where safe to do so, children are not subjected to unnecessary statutory processes. There has been very recent success with a small and safe reduction in the number of children on child protection plans.

In most children's cases seen during this visit, their needs are now being addressed at the appropriate level of intervention. However, inspectors did see the negative impact on children of previously poor practice and ineffective decision-making. Some children have been escalated prematurely to child protection processes and some children's cases have closed too soon. This has resulted in children being subjected to multiple and unnecessary interventions. There continue to be children who are experiencing drift and delay in having their needs met effectively at the earliest opportunity. The Trust is well sighted on the issues. Leaders have begun to target resources to review children's needs who are subject to statutory planning, and to strengthen management oversight at key decision-making points in children's lives.

There is evidence of some improved assessments, but this is not consistent across the children and families teams. Stronger assessments have used research and clearly link the initial concerns to the child's current situation. Most are updated regularly and are detailed, but the analysis of need and risk does not always focus on the right things. The voice of the child is evident in assessments, but their views do

not then influence their plans. While social workers visit children in line with their needs, not all visit records detail the purpose of the visit, nor the meaningful direct work that social workers articulate to inspectors is being done to progress the plan for the child.

Children's plans are reviewed at regular multi-agency meetings, but their effectiveness is undermined by their insufficient focus on how the need and risk will be addressed. Not all children's plans are updated when their circumstances change, or to ensure that progress is being made within a timescale that is right for the child.

Where appropriate, social workers are consulting with the child's wider family network to help and support parents address the concerns identified by professionals. Children's case file records evidence that for some children wider family support is being used to address concerns, although no formal family meetings were seen in children's records to demonstrate how this support is coordinated or safely monitored.

When safeguarding concerns arise, multi-agency strategy meetings are timely and are well attended by key professionals, who share relevant information to inform safeguarding decisions. The outcome of these meetings is not always well recorded. Minutes in some children's records are overly detailed and do not demonstrate interim safety planning while child protection enquiries take place. The recording of subsequent child protection enquiries is brief, and not all records detail the work undertaken to safeguard children or analyse the level of risk to inform the required response.

There has been improvement since the last inspection in the response to disabled children subject to child in need and child protection planning. Disabled children benefit from consistent, experienced workers who know them well. Disabled children are seen regularly and in line with their needs. This enables workers to have a good understanding of the children's experiences. Workers monitor the risks to children and take appropriate action to ensure that disabled children are appropriately safeguarded. The professional networks around disabled children are effective. Well-attended multi-agency meetings facilitate regular information-sharing and inform decision-making. Children's plans are informed by thorough assessments but recorded plans vary in their quality and do not always articulate children's progress well. Social workers understand the communication needs of disabled children, and when disabled children are non-verbal alternative methods of capturing children's views are used. However, disabled children's views, likes and dislikes are not a consistent feature in children's plans to demonstrate how they have influenced their plans.

Management oversight of child in need and child protection assessment and planning has improved since the last inspection and is in evidence on children's case files. Formal case supervision is taking place regularly and social workers report this to be

useful. Managers' oversight of assessments is contributing towards improving assessment timeliness. While supervision and oversight of work is evident on children's case files, it is brief and serves as a compliance check, rather than driving forward the child's plan.

Social workers reported positively about working for Bradford. They articulated feeling more settled, and better supported with their work. Managers are described as visible and available when needed. Some workers were able to discuss the wider vision of the Trust and what they described as the need to 'get back to basics' and 'do the simple things right'. All social workers spoke with knowledge about the children they are working with and the future plans for the child.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Matt Reed
His Majesty's Inspector

Pre-publication