

Report of the Strategic Director Children's Services to the meeting of the Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee to be held 5 August 2020

Subject:

V

Progress update following the Ofsted Inspection of Local Authorities Children's Services (ILACS) – Ofsted monitoring visit preparation, progress and continued challenge

Summary statement:

To provide the Committee with a progress update in respect of improvements identified within the Ofsted Improvement Plan, namely:

- 1. Ofsted October 2019 and February 2020 monitoring visit outcomes, progress and continued challenge.**
- 2. Improvement Programme update.**

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Overview & Scrutiny Area:

Children's Services

1. SUMMARY

1.1 Bradford's third Ofsted Monitoring Visit took place on the 16 and 17 October 2019.

The focus of the visit was:

1.1.2 Children who are subject of a child protection plan, those subject to the Public Law Outline (PLO) process and children who are at the edge of care. The inspection team consisted of Jan Edwards, Her Majesty's Inspector and Lisa Summers Her Majesty's Inspector with Parveen Hussain shadowing the process.

1.1.3 The outcome of the Ofsted monitoring visits which took place in October 2019 and March 2020 have now been published on the Ofsted website. You can read these letters via the following link <https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/provider/44/80449>.

1.1.4 The letter indicates that Children's Services are making progress in some areas, but with many areas that still need improvement. A key outcome Ofsted found was that changes have not happened quickly enough.

1.1.5 The letter recognises that the service has a new leadership team in post, it is developing a new staffing structure to help improve management oversight and align Social Care teams to work more closely with Early Help teams, and that the service is actively recruiting more staff to ease capacity concerns.

1.1.6 The letter also acknowledges that there are still significant challenges that Children's Services need to overcome. In particular, there needs to be consistent improvement in the quality of assessments together with management oversight on the quality of practice. Inspectors also noted social work capacity difficulties and issues with some partners not engaging in key child protection meetings.

1.1.7 Inspectors were noted that: "*Social Workers in Bradford are motivated to help children and families improve their circumstances. This is a result of their engagement in the improvement plan and their shared understanding of the vision for children's social care.*" And that: "*...children at the edge of care are being effectively supported to remain safely at home.*"

1.1.8 The letter also highlights two other areas that are improving: social work caseloads are reducing because of additional capacity; and the oversight of court pre-proceedings has improved reducing the drift and delay that children had previously experienced. This hard work is recognised and shows the difference that this work and the teams involved are making to children's lives. It shows that improvement is being made in what we do to make the changes that Ofsted require.

1.1.9 Bradford's 4th Ofsted visit took place on the 25th of February 2020. The inspectors were Jan Edwards, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Neil Penswick, Her Majesty's Inspector.

1.1.10 The focus of the visit was:

The progress made in achieving permanence for children in care. Inspectors also considered whether performance management information and quality assurance activity provide managers and leaders with an accurate view of social work practice and children's experiences

1.1.11 The letter acknowledges that the self-assessment accurately reflects that senior leaders have identified that permanence planning is not embedded in the service and has been compounded by weaknesses in help and protection practice, weak assessments, weak care planning and ineffective management oversight.

1.1.12 The letter recognises progress being made as the service has very recently moved to a locality model. The new locality head of service appointments have been made with the intention of providing a clearer oversight of practice and performance and tighter accountability for specific areas of practice. In addition, permanence panels and a new permanence tracker are being developed, but these are so new that it is too soon to report on their effectiveness in progressing children's plans.

1.1.13 The letter highlights the significant challenges with providing placement choice for children, particularly for those who need to live with their brothers and sisters. Sufficiency of placements is being addressed through a specific work stream of the improvement programme, including a review of provider services and the in house fostering service.

1.1.14 The letter indicates there is some evidence of improving supervision, which has a focus on permanence. However supervision is not sufficiently effective in driving the work and in ensuring that plans are achieved in a timely way.

1.1.15 The letter recognises that there is insufficient access to, and availability of, therapeutic provision to respond to children's emotional and mental health needs. There are pocket of life-story work being completed.

1.1.16 The letter highlights positives such as:

- Senior leaders have an improved understanding of the data.
- Where decisions are made to return children home, there is evidence of independent reviewing officer (IRO) oversight and challenge when necessary to ensure the best outcomes for young people.
- There is good evidence of oversight by IROs through their own auditing and monitoring.
- In spite of the significant delay, children live in foster care or residential homes which are meeting their needs, and they are making good progress from their individual starting points.
- When children are out of area, they are being visited and seen according to their plan.
- There is evidence that permanence is starting to become embedded in some social work practice in the locality and children in care teams from this low base.
- There is some effective social work practice and direct work with children and their families to support them settle in their new home.

2 IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME UPDATE

2.1 Improvements continue to be implemented despite Covid-19

2.1.1 Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, which has put the Council on an emergency footing, work has been continuing to implement the improvements required by Ofsted. A huge amount has been done by both our Council teams and our partners to implement new and more flexible ways of working to ensure vulnerable children are kept safe during the coronavirus lockdown. Staff were able to carry out high quality 'virtual' as well as real doorstep visits. In spite of the lockdown, all performance against key indicators is on an upward trajectory.

2.1.2 The improvement programmes focuses on four main areas: Prevention and early help; social work practice; leadership and management; and children in care and leaving care. The programme team continues to be involved in supporting the response to Covid 19 and are actively involved in recovery planning with the services across Children's Services. Key elements of the improvement initiatives we are currently working on are:

- A permanence tracker has been developed from scratch and is actively being populated. This will help monitor the progress of all placements far more closely.
- All Social Work documents have now been re-written and are now compliant with statutory requirements. These are with ICT colleagues so that they can be developed into online formats to make it easier for staff and for tracking.
- The Early Help Module is in the final stages of testing – once this is live, we will finally address the long standing issue of high volumes of no further action (NFA) cases at the front door.
- Supervision policy is now in draft and being consulted on with staff and trades unions and a number of new standardised templates have been produced for staff to drive consistency.
- A new challenge and resolution process has been implemented for child protection co-ordinators and for the Independent Reviewing Officers to ensure there is no drift and delay.
- The permanence tracker is supporting to identify children who have had life story work. We need to strengthen our approach and develop guidance and training as well as consider commissioning options to create capacity and expertise within the service.

2.2 New Practice Standards will improve our day-to-day work

2.2.1 A key piece of work that has been finalised has been the introduction of new practice standards (see appendix 3). These have been produced for all Council colleagues who work across Early Help, Youth Offending, Children's Social Care, Business Support, Fostering and Residential Services. The standards have been developed with colleagues across the service and will now form the basis of how work is approached. The standards will be supported by a programme of training and learning.

2.2.2 It's imperative that all the work that is done on a daily basis with children, young

people and families is consistent and clear. These new standards will help our staff do that and form a key part of the improvement journey and are non-negotiable.

- 2.2.3 The standards have had a wide input from different areas of the service which is really important and we want to thank the many staff who have contributed to them. The aim now is to always strengthen and improve how work is carried out, and these will be reviewed on a on a regular basis as the improvement journey moves forward.

2.3 Improving our Integrated Front Door

- 2.3.1 In September 2018, Ofsted found a number of concerns identified in relation to the effectiveness of the Integrated Front Door (IFD). A lack of systems, processes and quality were impacting on our ability to identify and respond to children in need of help and protection. This is important as the journey of every child supported by Children's Services in Bradford will begin at the IFD so it plays a crucial role in making sure children receive the right support from the right service at the right time.
- 2.3.2 The leadership team in the IFD is now all permanent and there are no interim or agency staff in management roles. A permanent management structure brings stability, vision and clarity for staff and members of the partnership.
- 2.3.3 Nabeel Hussain is the Head of Service for East Locality and also has responsibility for the Front Door. Nabeel joined Bradford in March 2020. Chatty Athwal is the newly appointed permanent Service Manager in the Front Door and commenced her role in April 2020. In addition to this, there are now five permanent Team Managers and two permanent Practice Supervisors which has resulted in a strong foundation to support and guide staff.

2.4 The Integrated Front Door in response to Covid-19

- 2.4.1 The IFD is operating a business as usual approach in spite of the challenges associated with Covid-19. The Council have made a significant investment into ensuring all staff in the front door have the equipment enabling them to work remotely. The effort and planning to support the function of a 'virtual front door' has been significant and this could not have been achieved without the support of our partners. A virtual management meeting is held every morning to discuss staffing issues, demand and daily tasks. Any concerns are identified early and shared with the Service Manager where necessary.
- 2.4.2 The service has remained operational and responsive during these unprecedented times. In addition to this, for week commencing 13 April (post bank holiday) 89% of contacts were progressed within one working day. For week commencing the 25 April 85% of contacts were progressed within 1 working day. This is the highest return there has been for some time and is testament to how hard staff are working.

2.5 Up and coming work

2.5.1 Planning for the next Ofsted monitoring visit is well underway. Although there has been plenty of positive work so far, there is much more to do. Over the coming weeks and months there are a number of areas we will be focusing on:

- Life Story work – When preparing for the last monitoring visit, it was identified that the approach to life story work needed to be strengthened. There is also a need to develop some practice guidance on this and provide training.
- Care planning meetings – practice guidance was developed and shared in February 2020. We will be monitoring its impact by way of a focused audit.
- Effective supervision – we are working on training for managers around what constitutes good supervision in line with the launch of the draft supervision policy.
- Chronologies – the practice guidance has been drafted and once fully implemented will help overcome the inconsistent approach Ofsted identified.
- Voice of the child – improvement is now being observed in how this is recorded on the files. An audit to measure impact will be undertaken in the coming months.
- Quality of assessments – a new assessment template is being built which will go in to test by the end of June ready for implementation by end of July.
- Quality of care plans – the three main care plans (Children in Need, Child Protection and Children in Care) are with ICT colleagues and online versions of these will go in to test as soon as they have been built.
- A temporary centralised recruitment team has been established within Children Social Care that has responsibility for the co-ordination of the start to end recruitment process, resulting in candidates being interviewed within 5 working days of the closing date of applications. This will help speed up recruitment and reduce the need for agency staffing.
- Final stages of completing the sufficiency strategy document with clear action plan, Governance and reviewing processes

2.6 Revised Children's Services Improvement Plan

2.6.1 The post Ofsted Improvement Plan is in the final stages of being revised. Bradford has had four monitoring visits from Ofsted, the last one in February 2020, which have all provided valuable feedback and learning. This new plan supports us to take forward Ofsted feedback and learning, along with the services' own self-evaluation which Ofsted recognise is a strength in that it sets out what needs to improve.

2.6.2 The new plan enables Children's Services to reflect on progress; consolidate the work done to date; and prioritise and re-focus on the work required as the improvement journey continues to move forward. The improvement framework encompasses and is informed by external scrutiny and assurance through Ofsted along with Bradford's own improvement practice. This is based on two key strands of activity:

- **Project initiated improvement** – these are areas of improvement that are whole system or service wide. They are significant changes in practice and

structure that would not be achieved by a single service or manager alone.

- **Individual Heads of Service self-evaluation initiated improvement** – these are areas of improvement that are mainly localised; focusing on compliance and quality, requiring performance improvement through intervention by individual managers.

2.6.3 Together the two strands of improvement activity will deliver Bradford's post Ofsted Improvement Plan and provide a robust assessment of what is done well, where improvement needs to happen and what the service is doing to achieve it.

3. OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

None.

4. FINANCIAL & RESOURCE APPRAISAL

There are no financial issues beyond the additional social work resources that have already been secured to assist in the improvement journey. Any additional support required will be picked up and supported via the Enablers Programme.

5. RISK MANAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE ISSUES

Risks in relation to improvement are being picked up and managed through the Improvement Programme governance framework.

6. LEGAL APPRAISAL

Not applicable.

7. OTHER IMPLICATIONS

7.1 EQUALITY & DIVERSITY

Not applicable.

7.2 SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS

Not applicable.

7.3 GREENHOUSE GAS EMISSIONS IMPACTS

Not applicable.

7.4 COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

Not applicable.

7.5 HUMAN RIGHTS ACT

Not applicable.

7.6 TRADE UNION

Not applicable.

7.7 WARD IMPLICATIONS

The Ofsted judgement affects all wards.

7.8 IMPLICATIONS FOR CORPORATE PARENTING

All improvements across Children's Services will strengthen the council's ability to discharge its Corporate Parenting responsibilities.

7.9 ISSUES ARISING FROM PRIVACY IMPACT ASSESMENT

None; the Ofsted report and Notice of Improvement are in the public domain.

8. NOT FOR PUBLICATION DOCUMENTS

None.

9. OPTIONS

Not applicable.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

That this Committee notes the contents of this report.

11. APPENDICES

1. Ofsted Monitoring Visit Letters - follow this link <https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/provider/44/80449>.
2. Vital Signs report (May 2020 data).
3. Practice Standards – follow this link <https://bradfordchildcare.proceduresonline.com/index.html>

12. BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None.