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Gladys Rhodes-White
Interim Strategic Director
Department of Children's Services
City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council,
Margaret McMillan Tower,
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Dear Gladys

Monitoring visit of Bradford local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Bradford local authority children's services on 11 June 2019. The visit was the second monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in September 2018. This visit was carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectors, Neil Penswick and Andy Waugh.

The pace of improvement is slow for the children in need of the help and protection services evaluated on this visit. Although there are examples of good social work, the vast majority of the work is not timely or effective in addressing children's needs. The workloads and high turnover of staff in many teams, and weaknesses in management oversight, inhibit the quality of social work practice. Limited improvements in quality assurance, and delays in recruitment to permanent positions, have hindered progress.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the immediate response to children in need of help and protection and the quality and timeliness of assessments and plans. They also looked at management decision-making, oversight and supervision.

A range of evidence was considered during the visit, including electronic case records, performance management data, audits and quality assurance reports. In addition, inspectors spoke to a range of staff, including managers and social workers.

Overview

The interim strategic director (DCS) has brought much-needed skills and experience to Bradford to assist the local authority in improving services since the last inspection. Inspectors saw some positive improvements in assessment quality and in

the immediate response to child protection concerns, but also several areas in which insufficient progress has been made. Senior managers are fully aware of the practice deficits. While they have taken some positive actions, the pace of improvement in key areas is not swift enough. This is resulting in delays in children in need and children in need of protection having their needs identified and addressed.

There is some effective social work practice being undertaken by committed and skilled social workers. However, the local authority's own audits judge most of the case work to be inadequate. There are weaknesses in management grip of social work practice at all levels. Quality assurance is not focused on improving learning across the workforce. The lack of urgency to recruit to permanent social work posts is resulting in inconsistent services to children and their families. Social work caseloads vary from small numbers to over 50 children. Where caseloads are high, this inhibits social workers' capacity to develop trusting relationships with children and their families and to deliver good-quality social work for all children.

There has been a decline in some aspects of the front door services. Too many children are being inappropriately referred to social care by other agencies. This is seriously impacting on the capability of the front door team to respond to contacts and referrals in a timely way. Inspectors found examples where parental consent has also been dispensed with inappropriately and the reasoning is poorly recorded. In some cases, this is resulting in children and their families being subject to disproportionate social work processes.

Findings and evaluation of progress

At the inspection in September 2018, there were serious deficits in the quality of social work practice in the areas evaluated on this visit. This was due to insufficient numbers of social workers and inconsistent and weak management. Politicians have committed to significant additional finance to facilitate improvement. An experienced and skilled DCS has been in post for the past seven months. The new permanent DCS is due to start on 1 July 2019. The deputy director, children's social care post is held on an interim basis by a senior manager seconded from another local authority while permanent recruitment is underway.

Senior leaders have focused tenaciously on employing additional agency and temporary staff and this has increased workforce capacity. However, there have been issues about the quality of the work of some of those staff and too many have been leaving at short notice, impacting negatively on children's lives. There have been delays in recruitment to permanent social work and management posts due to overly bureaucratic processes within the wider council, although recruitment to these posts is now proceeding.

The self-assessment accurately reports that while some managers are contributing well to improving the lives of some children, this is not consistent across all social work teams. Supervision is not held regularly for all social workers, with some experiencing lengthy periods between these meetings. Managers are generally available for consultation, but this is not well recorded. In the poorer managed

cases, supervision is not driving the progress of children's plans or remedying weaknesses in the quality of social work practice.

Social work caseloads vary significantly across the assessment teams and within each team. Some social workers have over 50 cases. Those workers with the higher number of cases reported to inspectors that they experience serious challenges in delivering a consistently good service to children and their families. Senior managers monitor the size of social work caseloads and have taken action to reduce these. However, inspectors could not yet see the impact of these changes.

The local authority considers the vast majority of the areas of social work support being scrutinised on this visit remains inadequate. This reflects what inspectors saw in the cases they reviewed during this visit. There continues to be a legacy of poor practice, which has not been addressed. This, together with current drift and delay in casework, means that not all children have their needs identified and responded to soon enough.

A programme of auditing has been introduced since the last inspection. While this is evidence of progress, it is not leading to consistently improving practice. There are inconsistencies in the auditors' understanding of what good practice looks like, and in their ability to identify weaker practice and follow up on remedial actions. Audits are solely based on reviews of the electronic records and are not undertaken with the allocated social worker. This does not provide an accurate understanding of children's progress or experiences, or an understanding of the quality of the casework to facilitate individual learning for the worker and manager. This was an issue raised on the last Ofsted monitoring visit in March 2019. Follow-up actions do not always cover all the identified weaknesses, and there are no timescales or further reviews to ensure that the identified issues are being addressed. The DCS reported that children's services will be introducing a new approach to audits, conducted with workers, this month. Also, another local authority is currently in the process of reviewing the service-wide quality assurance arrangements to identify further improvements.

A small number of the assessments seen by inspectors were of a high quality. They evidence positive work with children to gain their views. However, most assessments were poor, with common weaknesses, including the failure to address the needs of all the children in a family, and not always recognising risk. Many assessments are not completed quickly enough to meet the needs of the children. Subsequent plans are often weak in identifying actions to improve the lives of the children and are not specific about what needs to happen, by whom and by when. There remains too much focus on the behaviours of parents and carers rather than the lived experience of children. Inspectors also saw in some cases that social workers were intrusively carrying out unnecessary assessments on children and involving families with social care, due to poor quality evaluation of information at the front door.

The quality of the response to concerns raised by other agencies at the front door has declined since Ofsted's last visit in March 2019. Part of this is due to the increase in the number of referrals from other agencies which do not need children's services

involvement. This is significantly impacting on the capacity of the front door team to respond to children in need in a timely manner. A new multi-agency Continuum of Need document is being developed to address this lack of understanding across the partnership. Inappropriate referrals are being discussed with the agencies in a new strategic group led by the DCS, although it is too early for this to demonstrate impact.

At the front door, there are too many occasions when social work managers are dispensing with the consent of parents without there being over-riding child protection concerns. The reason for these decisions was also not being recorded by managers. This was identified as needing to improve at the inspection in September 2018. Agencies were also being asked to investigate safeguarding concerns themselves rather than them being actioned by children's services. This resulted in delays in ensuring that the children were protected. The DCS responded robustly when these issues were raised by inspectors, and immediately took action to review practice. The DCS also requested a further review of recent contacts to ensure that these issues were not widespread.

In the main, urgent child protection concerns are recognised promptly and appropriate actions are then taken. Strategy meetings are well attended by social workers and West Yorkshire Police, although less well by other key agencies. However, the recordings of the meetings lack the necessary detail to inform decision-making, and future identified actions are not always specific with a timescale identified for work to be completed. There has been a significant increase in the number of children subject to joint child protection investigations with the police, child protection conferences and child protection plans. This shows that there has been an improvement in the recognition of high levels of risk by children's services since the last Ofsted inspection.

The vast majority of social workers who met with inspectors were very positive about working for Bradford. They spoke highly about support from their team colleagues and their access to a good range of training. They also reported being kept informed and involved in service developments by the DCS, including regular large-scale meetings with staff, emailed staff briefings and personal recognition of good practice. They fully understood current weaknesses in the service and were committed to the goal of improving practice for the children of Bradford.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Neil Penswick
Her Majesty's Inspector