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Dear Sheila Durr

Focused visit to Bury local authority children's services

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic.

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Bury children's services on 29 and 30 September, and 1 October 2020. The visit was carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectors Lisa Summers, Pauline Higham, Diane Partridge, Emmy Tomsett and Andrew Hemmings.

The methodology for this visit was in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. However, the delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. This visit was carried out fully by remote means. Inspectors used video calls for discussions with local authority social workers, managers and leaders and sampled children's case records. Discussions with schools, foster carers and children and young people also took place. The lead inspector and the director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19 and meeting the needs of the local authority's workforce.

Overview

At the time of this visit, increasing COVID-19 numbers mean that the local authority has moved from recovery and back into emergency response mode. In addition, after extending her term to support the service through this highly challenging period, the current director of children's services retired at the end of this visit, and a new director took up post. Every aspect of children's services has, and continues to be, significantly affected by the pandemic, and senior managers, leaders and frontline staff have worked tirelessly, investing significant time and effort in continuing to support the most vulnerable children and young people in Bury. The local authority and partners have been nimble and have adapted well to delivering help and support differently, and to ensuring that flexibilities are appropriately used when needed.

Senior managers and leaders understand the magnitude and complexity of strategic and operational considerations, and they have appropriately prioritised their response to COVID-19 in relation to reconfiguring services. They have implemented new ways of working in order to maintain 'business as usual' for children in need of help and protection, and for children in care, by developing mechanisms to identify children newly vulnerable and by providing support and safety to staff.

Children's services have benefited from significant corporate support, including financial freedom, which has helped them to make the right decisions for children and young people, through the diligent and mature strategic thinking and partnership working of leaders and managers. Senior managers and leaders took swift and decisive action in response to the pandemic. They prioritised, at the earliest opportunity, along with partners, areas of greatest risk, expediting plans in order to progress the implementation of the team around the school and mobile working. As the pandemic continues, it will be important to sustain improvements and continue to increase the pace of change.

Throughout this highly demanding and stressful period, senior managers have continued to progress service improvements in order to support the quality and impact of decision-making, and to improve partners' understanding of thresholds. They have strengthened their response to working with children who are subject to pre-proceedings and improved their performance and quality assurance. They are now beginning to implement their chosen social work model. This is supporting better quality assessments to inform decisions about needs, interventions and next steps for children.

Decision-making in the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) is appropriate, with swift protective action being taken when children are at immediate risk of harm. Children are seen appropriately and in accordance with their risk assessments. Children and young people's relationships with their social workers are being maintained and, in some cases, enhanced by the use of technology. Care leavers have received an impressive and highly responsive level of support.

A lack of clear management direction and too many decision-making points in the MASH mean that some children experience delays in having their needs assessed. Protective actions are not routinely identified in strategy meetings. There is a lack of focus on children's experiences in plans and in planning. Timely authoritative action is not always taken, particularly for children experiencing long-term neglect. Important decisions are not supported by a clear assessment of parents' capacity to sustain change. More recent practice is showing early signs of improvement in the quality of plans, and in planning, for children in need of help and protection.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Management direction and decision-making in the MASH in order to support timelier assessments of children's needs.
- The quality of strategy meetings to clearly define multi-agency actions to keep children protected during the investigation period and define how investigations should be undertaken.
- The assessment of parental ability to sustain change before a decision is made to move children between different tiers of social care support.
- The quality of child protection and child in need plans, and planning, with focus on children's experiences, and on the timeliness of taking swift authoritative action when children's circumstances are not improving.

Findings

- Leaders have recognised and appropriately responded to the increased risks to children and the increased pressures within the home because of COVID-19, and because of both national and local lockdowns. The local authority has made good use of strong relationships with partners, including the police, the voluntary sector and schools, using local intelligence to successfully identify and respond to children who are newly vulnerable as a result of COVID-19. As a result, there has not been a significant drop in referrals to children's services, and early help has significantly increased.
- Throughout the pandemic, leaders have continued to identify and support children who are not on roll at a school, and they have taken action to encourage children's attendance. Children who are missing school and those who are electively educated at home are well monitored, including routine safeguarding and welfare checks being carried out for vulnerable children, either by telephone or through 'door-step' visits.
- When children are referred to the MASH, decisions about the level of response and service provided are appropriate for the significant majority of children. Multi-agency information-sharing has not been inhibited throughout the pandemic. Collaboration with the police is effective, but the threshold for sharing intelligence provided by the police beyond the initial decision-making point is not agreed so as to inform wider decisions about risk. Work is ongoing to address this. There has

been a purposeful strategy to reduce demand at the front door through the implementation of rigorous screening. However, too many decision-making points and excessive screening of some contacts are resulting in delays in some children's needs being assessed, and in accessing the support they need in a timely way.

- When children need protecting, for the vast majority, decision-making is appropriate, and the response is swift and well-coordinated. Child protection strategy meetings provide effective forums for partners to share information that enables the right threshold decisions to be made for children. At the start of the pandemic, meetings were held remotely, and they continue to be so at this time, enabling improved partnership attendance. Child protection strategy meetings, however, do not consistently identify the actions necessary to progress investigations or what needs to happen to keep children safe during the investigation period. Although actions were taken to meet the immediate safeguarding needs of children who need protecting, this did not routinely translate into clear multi-agency child protection planning.
- Most assessments are strong, history is considered and a solid understanding of children's needs through detailed analysis and the assessment of risk is provided. Additional stressors and the capacity of parents to provide good-quality parenting during lockdown are well identified and recorded in most cases. Children receive the help and support they need throughout the assessment period.
- Where there have been repeat referrals, particularly where children experience domestic abuse and neglect, historical decisions were often overly optimistic about parents' capacity to sustain change. More recently, decisions are more realistic about the level of support needed, as social workers demonstrate a deeper understanding of children's needs through improved assessments.
- The situations and lives of the majority of children in need, and those who need protection, are improving. Social workers have maintained relationships with children through face-to-face visiting and, for some children, through increased contact through virtual meetings. Additional visits are sometimes made by partner agencies, including schools. Social workers are making their best efforts to see children and are being as creative as they can to engage with them.
- Neglect is a significant feature in Bury, and many children experience repeated lengthy periods of social care involvement, moving between different levels of social care interventions, without long-term change being sustained. Overall, plans and planning are too task focused, lacking clarity in defining what needs to improve for children, how this will be achieved, and clear timescales to measure progress. Some children are closed to social care or have stepped down to a lower level of intervention without updated assessments to understand what has improved for them or to test whether parental change has been sustained. For some children, there are delays in social workers and managers taking timely, authoritative action, such as the use of pre-proceedings, or in bringing them into care. This means that they continue to experience neglect for too long.

- Senior managers recognise that there is a legacy of children already being subject to lengthy pre-proceedings, and they have recently strengthened their approach to public law outline (PLO) through the introduction of increased tracking and routine senior management oversight to reduce these delays. It is too soon to see the impact of this work for children.
- The recent implementation of the local authority's practice model in parts of the service is leading to better quality assessments in order to inform decisions about needs, interventions and next steps. While the existence of the pandemic has accelerated some areas of practice, such as the use of virtual working, this has hindered the full implementation of the model.
- Despite restrictions as a result of the pandemic, both nationally and locally, children in care, and care leavers, benefit from a responsive needs-led service. A commissioned, dedicated Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) provides swift access to bespoke provision for children and young people, carers and social workers. Health and mental health services are maintained and delivered through a combination of face-to-face and virtual support. Personal advisers (PAs) understand well the impact of the pandemic on young people's mental health and emotional well-being and are impressively responsive in meeting these needs through well-coordinated, multi-agency support and increased contact.
- Social Workers and PAs show clear determination to do the right thing for children and young people, maintaining communication through a combination of both face-to-face and virtual meetings, even throughout lockdown. Children have good access to resources to facilitate communications on virtual platforms. Visiting is highly responsive and child centred, and is shaped by a number of factors, including the need to support and maintain placements, and to help children and young people deal with difficult situations or to reassure them of their safety.
- The virtual school does not do enough to secure high-quality education for children in care. Systems for monitoring the educational progress of children are underdeveloped, relying on staff who do not have sufficient training. As a result, Personal Education Plans (PEPs) are too often completed slowly, and they lack important information. The completion rate of PEPs is low. Since the partial closure of schools in March 2020, meetings to review children's progress have been conducted using electronic platforms. This has made it more difficult for carers to participate. Children are reluctant to contribute to these meetings.
- Dedicated care leavers champions and ongoing training have improved the understanding of corporate parenting responsibilities across the council. This has intensified during the pandemic and the support for care leavers is impressive. Young people benefit from enduring relationships with social workers and PAs. Staff understand well the additional stressors, impact and additional needs the COVID-19 pandemic brings, and their commitment and tenacity to mitigate concerns are to be commended. During the pandemic, social workers and PAs deliver food, toiletries and creative arts and crafts boxes to isolated and vulnerable children in care, and to care leavers. Although the numbers of young people attending education, employment and training remain lower than those for

similar authorities, it is positive that the numbers have been sustained throughout the pandemic. Young people are continuing to be supported back into training and employment throughout the pandemic. Young people have good access to resources to help them with both learning and working from home.

- Children in care are helped and supported to maintain contact and regular communication with their families, based on their needs. When this has been assessed as required, face-to-face contact has been maintained. However, the majority of dedicated time with children's families is supported virtually. The methods used for facilitating family time are responsive to changes in national and local pandemic restrictions, and, more recently, face-to-face arrangements are being re-established.
- Social workers and managers are doing their best to do what is right for children when making decisions about where they will live. The local authority uses a range of placements, and even at the height of restrictions, most children have been, and continue to be, placed in high-quality homes that meet their needs. The local authority has a clear and comprehensive process for matching children with long-term foster carers. Matching reports are of a high quality and have an appropriate focus on children's history and longer-term outcomes. In circumstances where children may be placed with parents, decisions are well informed by strong assessments. The views of children and young people are well considered, and social workers ensure that children who return to live with parents are robustly monitored through clear and effective multi-agency arrangements.
- Creative thinking and determination secure permanence decisions for a number of children, despite disruptions to court processes. Senior managers have built on strong relationships with the courts and partner agencies to create effective workarounds to progress adoption, special guardianship orders and discharges of care orders when children are placed with their parents. This enhances children's feelings of stability, security and belonging. A newly formed permanence panel facilitates matching with families for children with plans of long-term fostering without delay. Inspectors could not see how these important decisions were being communicated to children.
- The director of children's services retained a high level of oversight and scrutiny across the service, which allowed her to have a good understanding of the quality and impact of social work practice. The local authority's approach to performance management and quality assurance has been strengthened through increased management capacity, regular auditing and routine team reporting, creating greater ownership and accountability across the service. Performance reports identify areas requiring further scrutiny through targeted thematic sampling. Increased management capacity is enabling greater scrutiny of practice and targeted improvements. Senior managers understand that there is more work to do to improve the quality of audits, and work is underway to address this.
- Staff reported that they have been helped and supported well, not only professionally, but also personally, throughout the pandemic. Managers and leaders have kept staff close, connected and safe, while recognising and

acknowledging their hard work. This is bolstering morale and helping to keep sickness levels low. Caseloads are reported to be complex and challenging, but manageable, at this time. Staff demonstrate resilience and agility in maintaining face-to-face visits with vulnerable children and young people.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning your next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Lisa Summers
Her Majesty's Inspector