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Dear Mr Douglas

Focused visit to Bradford local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Bradford local authority children's services on 15 December 2020. The inspectors were Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMIs) Jan Edwards, Brenda McLaughlin, Matt Reed, Neil Penswick and Malcolm Kirtley.

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.

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. The lead inspector and the director of children's services (DCS) 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.

The visit looked at the quality and impact of key decision-making for children who need help and protection, children in care and care leavers, together with the impact of leadership on service development.

Overview

The local authority's improvement following the judgement inspection in September 2018 has been slow. Progress was initially stalled by the early failure to understand the breadth of the inadequacy and by difficulties in achieving permanent appointments to the most senior posts. The current senior management team was not fully in place until March 2020.

While focusing on the recovery and improvement of the authority's children's services, leaders are also having to respond to pressing demands arising from the pandemic. Bradford has consistently had one of the highest infection rates in the country and has remained subject to either local or national restrictions throughout the first wave of the pandemic. Demand for children's social care has remained high.

Leaders have achieved some positive steps forward in this challenging context. They have taken opportunities to maximise partnership working with other organisations, with a shared determination to focus on the most vulnerable children and families. They have been putting in place the basic infrastructure and practice standards needed to support improvement within the service. They have developed more effective oversight to support immediate decision-making when children are first referred to social care. They are renewing IT resources to better support frontline practice. They have recruited to specialist posts and secured financial investment for children's services.

However, there remain some significant weaknesses in practice and oversight in frontline services, particularly as a result of continued workforce instability, high caseloads and ineffective casework planning. Senior leaders are fully aware of these challenges and are working to address them in the next phase of their improvement plan. Managers and social workers are starting to address the legacy of weak practice, although they recognise there is much still to be done to secure and sustain improvement.

Children in need and child protection plans are not always effective in improving children's circumstances. Some children in need cases are often closed or stepped down without evidence of sustained change, because management oversight has not thoroughly tested the impact of social work practice for children and families. Enduring drift and delay, due to long-standing poor practice, continue to affect some children. Consistency of social work practice remains an issue. Children in care have been well supported during the pandemic. However, care leavers receive an inconsistent service; while some are well supported, others have experienced poorer levels of support through the pandemic.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The areas for improvement continue to be those identified at the ILACS inspection in September 2018. They have not yet been fully addressed and they

remain relevant two years on. Leaders have a good understanding of the areas for improvement, as reflected in their self-evaluation and ongoing improvement plans. Thus, the service is appropriately focused on raising the quality of management oversight and supervision, strengthening child in need and child protection planning, ensuring more robust monitoring and preventing delay for children in legal planning and in proceedings, improving support for care leavers, and progressing recruitment initiatives to ensure workforce stability and more manageable caseloads.

Findings

- The new integrated front door (IFD), the service which receives contacts and referrals to children's social care, went live at the height of the first wave of the pandemic in June. The service has been operating at a time of very high demand, and with a dispersed workforce. While the IFD is still being embedded, and adapting to these new demands, practice here is improving. Better, more timely triaging of contacts, clear management oversight, effective use of agency and historical information and an informed analysis of risk lead to an appropriate determination of next steps in most children's cases. Issues of parental consent, which had been a problem since the judgement inspection, are now better understood.
- Strategy discussions are well attended and timely, and effective safety plans are developed to ensure children's immediate safety while section 47 enquiries are ongoing. These enquiries are thorough. Professionals speak to children as part of the process, so understand what life is like for them. This supports appropriate early decision-making.
- When children who receive early help have heightened needs, or concerns for them arise, there is an appropriate escalation through the IFD. However, some decisions to close work in children's social care are premature. In particular, some children in need cases are closed or stepped down to early help before goals have been achieved. Managers' oversight is not outcome focused, and it is not ensuring that any change is realistic and sustainable. Similarly, some child protection plans end before sustained change can be evidenced. This results in children coming back into the service and experiencing repeated services and interventions.
- Some social work assessments are too parent focused, and they do not always consider all children or adults in the household. In contrast to section 47 enquiries, there is little observation and analysis of children's lived experience within assessments.
- While there is good information-sharing between agencies in meetings about children, this does not always translate into proactive work to progress children's plans. In some cases, effective child protection work is making a significant positive difference for children. However, a lack of robust planning and management oversight mean that other children continue to experience drift and delay. For example, some children are exposed to neglect for too long before

action is taken to protect them. Similarly, over-optimism is resulting in a failure to take authoritative action soon enough in some cases where children are living in situations of domestic abuse. Leaders have taken steps to strengthen processes supporting management oversight and supervision, although the impact of these changes on the quality of practice is not consistent.

- Disabled children receive child-centred social work support which is making a positive difference for them. Transition planning for older disabled children is promoted early and is appropriately focused on their identified needs.
- Social workers have maintained relationships with children through continued face-to-face visiting, which is supplemented by virtual contact. A multi-agency COVID-19 team is equipped to undertake in-person visiting to households where there is a risk of infection. This has helped to ensure that the most vulnerable children are seen by professionals.
- Children's progress is hindered by too many changes of social worker and poor planning. Management oversight of children's cases has been more regular in recent months. However, a lack of sufficient challenge and direction makes it harder to drive change within families and improve outcomes for children.
- The complex safeguarding hub provides an authoritative and confident response for children at risk of exploitation. The hub's thorough screening of contacts and referrals about children, the specialist advice and consultation provided across the service and regular risk assessment meetings have strengthened practice in this area.
- Leaders have acted to strengthen legal planning and the quality of the monitoring of work undertaken before legal proceedings. However, oversight is still not robust enough to prevent drift for some children who are the subject of pre-proceedings and care proceedings.
- For those children recently brought into care, this was the right decision at a time of crisis in their lives. Leaders have recognised that not all child protection planning had been effective in reducing risk. Action they have taken to address risk has resulted in more children being brought into care in the first wave of the pandemic.
- There is a significant challenge in matching children to new homes, particularly when they come into care in an emergency. This makes it harder to sustain care placements and means that some children experience multiple moves and lack early stability. Social workers are not always considering wider family members as alternative carers early enough to prevent drift and delay before the child's permanent home is confirmed. In the first wave of the pandemic more children benefited from stable long-term homes. Foster carers are providing consistent care and support, at a time when children are feeling at their most anxious. Senior leaders know that sufficiency of placements is a challenge. They are working to address their understanding of local need, recruit more foster carers and to remodel the residential offer.

- The work of the independent reviewing officers and chairs of child protection conferences is beginning to have a positive impact on practice.
- Problems with Bradford's IT infrastructure not being able to support video conferencing for children's meetings have been a cause for concern. Leaders had plans in place to make video technology available following this visit.
- Staff have provided good support for children in care and for foster carers during the pandemic. Social workers undertake appropriate assessments to determine safe arrangements to ensure that children can stay in touch with their families. Foster carers and their wider families have played a key role in ensuring stability of care for children and in supporting their family time and ongoing learning.
- Children's emotional well-being needs are understood but are not always provided for in a timescale that meets their needs. Waiting times for child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) are unacceptably long. Leaders are continuing to challenge this with the clinical commissioning group.
- Children's social care and the virtual school are supporting improving educational outcomes for children in care. They have better attendance than their peers and reduced rates of exclusion. The clear majority of these children are progressing to employment, education and training. The new head of the virtual school is starting to build capacity in the service, which is leading work to improved focus in securing appropriate school placements and supporting children in care who have special educational needs and/or disabilities.
- Senior leaders are responding to a substantial rise in the number of children who have started to be home educated over the COVID-19 period, with an investment of significant resources. This has enabled staff to continue to provide appropriate monitoring and provide advice to families.
- The local authority's education team is providing extensive support to schools throughout the pandemic. Hub working has brought together schools, education advisers and education safeguarding officers. Developing detailed risk registers has helped schools to keep a watchful eye on the most vulnerable children. Furthermore, schools have been significant players in Bradford Council's 'No child goes hungry' campaign, through the provision of thousands of hot meals for children and their families.
- Young people who have left care receive an inconsistent service. The quality of the support they receive is too dependent on individual personal advisers. Some care leavers are benefiting from a high level of contact and effective support at this most difficult of times. However, the additional needs of individual young people during the pandemic have not been systematically assessed. This has left some without a clear plan of how they are to be supported. There is a lack of ambition for some care leavers and a failure of management oversight to consistently drive planning for these young people. Personal advisers' caseloads are too high for them to be able to consistently provide the level of support that many of these vulnerable young people require.

- The Bradford area has seen an increase in the numbers of young people who are youth benefit claimants. In this context, there has been a significant drop in the number of care leavers who have been able to maintain employment, education or training. While this has been an impact of the pandemic, some care leavers told inspectors that they had not received the right support and guidance for their education. Others have received better support, which has helped them secure college and university places and apprenticeships.
- Strategic partnerships and collaborative working have been enhanced through the leadership of the chief executive and DCS. The safeguarding partnership has also helped to keep vulnerable children in focus during the pandemic. Leaders swiftly established a COVID-19 scientific advisory group, ensuring that specialist knowledge and multi-agency intelligence is used well. Building on learning from the work of the specialist COVID-19 team, and capitalising on the new strengthened partnerships, leaders have recently brought in four health practitioners to work in social work teams, initially with a focus on pre-birth and vulnerable children.
- There is some limited use of the flexibilities available through amendment to regulations, mostly to vary visiting arrangements in line with an appropriate risk assessment. Shrewd budget planning has enabled the council to prioritise children's services for substantial capital and revenue investments, enabling improved capacity in the service.
- Improvements to quality assurance and management information are giving leaders a clearer line of sight to practice. The service's audits tell them that a significant majority of work is still not meeting their own basic standards. Leaders are focusing on the accuracy and consistency of auditing practice and on a more robust learning process, to strengthen social work services.
- Leaders understand that one of the greatest risks to ongoing improvement remains the challenge of recruiting to permanent social work posts, and in stabilising the workforce. While they have achieved some recruitment success for specialist and management posts, the service remains heavily reliant on agency social workers. New recruitment initiatives are targeting experienced social workers. However, considerable challenges remain, and improvement remains fragile while there is such workforce instability. The pandemic has hindered the delivery of face-to-face training for staff on new practice standards and associated form templates. This is a key part of the improvement plan. Leaders have put plans in place to progress this.

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

Yours sincerely

Jan Edwards
Her Majesty's Inspector