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Dear Mark Douglas

Monitoring visit of Bradford children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Bradford children's services on 28 April 2021. This was the fifth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in October 2018. The inspectors were Jan Edwards, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Victoria Horsefield, Her Majesty's Inspector.

The local authority is starting to make progress in improving services in some specific areas. However, the progress on the quality of core social work practice has been too slow to show impact for children and families. This has been exacerbated by the breadth of the inadequacy and maintaining service delivery during the pandemic.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the experience of children in need of help and protection, with a particular focus on children in need and children subject to a child protection plan. This focus is based on the recommendations and areas for improvement identified in the ILACS judgement inspection in October 2018.

The visit considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records and discussion with social workers and managers and leaders. In consultation with the director of children's services (DCS), it was agreed that the visit should be conducted on site. COVID-19 (coronavirus) precautions were observed.

Overview

There have been four previous monitoring visits, which have all reported on the slow pace of change in improving the quality of core social work practice. Although the

service has been restructured and there has been significant investment in staffing and service improvement planning, due to the breadth and depth of the inadequacy identified in 2018, this has not led to sufficient positive change for some children.

Inspectors identified delays in the completion of assessments leading to delays in the identification of risk, need and early intervention. Where risks are identified, this does not always result in the timely progression to an initial child protection conference and, if needed, resultant multi-agency protection plan. Bradford has a very small number of children who are known to be living in private fostering arrangements. Of these, there are a small number who have not been supported by the right checks to confirm the safety of these placements, and visiting is not always conducted according to private fostering standards.

The positive practice in relation to strategy meetings and section 47 enquires has been sustained since the assurance focus visit in December 2020.

Senior leaders have been successful in recruiting to management posts at all levels and to specialist positions. However, the recruitment of experienced social workers remains a challenge. This means that there are still some social workers with high caseloads, and children still experience too many changes of social worker and managers. As a result, too often, children's circumstances are not improving quickly enough.

Findings from this visit concur with the view of the senior leadership team, that there is more to do to improve the standard of practice and embed the new practice standards.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Referrals and demand for children's social care have remained constant throughout the last six months. Consequently, there are demands in every part of the service, including high numbers of assessments. A significant number of assessments are new assessments on open children's cases. This is as a result of the practice of updating assessments every six months. These updated assessments are proportionate and include all the adults of the family. Some social workers have demonstrated persistence in trying to engage non-resident fathers. Assessments include the child's voice, although their unique and diverse needs, identity and culture are not routinely considered in order to understand the child's world and their lived experience.

When risks to children escalate, strategy meetings are timely and there is good participation and information-sharing by partner agencies. A clear statement for next steps is made, children's interim safety is considered and actions determined. The subsequent section 47 enquiries include multi-agency information and the views of parents and, in some cases, the wider family. Children are seen and spoken to, to ascertain their views, facilitating effective decision-making about next steps. This confirms that the positive practice in strategy meetings and section 47 enquiries seen at the assurance focused visit in December 2020 has been maintained.

When section 47 enquiries confirm that the risk to children requires a multi-agency child protection plan, some children's cases are not taken to conference quickly enough. This means that there has been delay in the needs of those children being considered and to having a multi-agency plan in place to reduce the risk. In addition, some children's needs, which were identified at the onset of the assessment, have not been swiftly addressed through timely services or intervention. Child protection conference chairs are routinely talking to parents before their meeting, which ensures that parents are more prepared and understand the concerns. There is also more recent evidence of the child protection chairs raising appropriate challenge to the social worker when practice falls below expected standards. It is too soon to evaluate the impact of this practice.

Many assessments (both on new referrals and on open children's cases) are taking too long for children. This means that children's circumstances or the risks that they are exposed to are not swiftly identified or responded to in order to manage risk. Much of this delay is attributable to the numerous changes of social worker and team manager on children's cases. This has had a very real impact: delaying the progression of children's cases; making children subject to statutory services for too long; children's needs not being assessed and identified, and risk not being reduced quickly enough. Social workers told inspectors that it has also impacted on children and families being able to trust in their worker and has hindered meaningful relational social work practice.

Some family assessments are also overly focused on the child who was specifically referred for a service. When this happens, the other children in the family are not always included in any depth in the assessment. As a result, inspectors saw examples where the other children in the family had been re-referred after they had experienced harm.

Children in need and child protection plans are regularly reviewed by a range of partner agencies. However, there is variability in how rigorously the social worker uses the child's plan to check progress to avoid drift. The initial plans developed from the first child protection conference are too long. This means that it can be overwhelming for parents to understand those areas which are a priority for them to focus on, and how they will be supported. For some children, the child protection planning had ended too quickly and without all the identified needs being addressed or before there was evidence that change could be sustained. This was also an issue found at the assurance visit.

There is very recent evidence that, since February, newly commissioned agency social work teams have incrementally been introduced, increasing social work capacity by 50 practitioners. These teams are beginning to have a positive impact for some children. Where there has been drift and delay, assessments are now leading to clear and focused planning, and children are beginning to make progress.

Inspectors have seen a range of interventions for befriending, family support, domestic abuse and substance misuse, which are available to children and their

families as part of the plan to improve their circumstances. The community resource workers hold a key role in delivering targeted interventions identified in the plan, which are making a real difference to children's circumstances.

Social workers lack confidence and knowledge in recognising private fostering arrangements, which then leads to a lack of authoritative planning for children. Following a recent review of these children's cases, the local authority has taken action to ensure the appropriateness of these arrangements. However, at this visit inspectors found that some children are not being seen according to the standards expected in private fostering. Not all social workers are aware that they need to conduct checks, including police checks, to ensure that the arrangements are safe.

Social workers have continued to see children face to face where this has been possible. However, some visiting has not been regular and according to the child's needs. For families who have been in self-isolation, visits have been virtual. There is an option of being able to undertake home visits to vulnerable children in families affected by COVID-19 through the specialist COVID-19 team. Recording of visits undertaken is variable, with some clearly being purposeful and hearing the child's voice and others being perfunctory.

Some social workers have been able to deliver creative pieces of direct work to identify children's wishes and feelings, but this is not consistently the case. This has been affected by the limitations dictated by the pandemic and, also, the many changes of worker. Some older children have become disengaged and frustrated by the numerous changes of social worker and the necessity of repeating their story many times. This stop-start approach has meant that the new worker has had to earn trust and persist with engaging the child, which can take time.

Social workers' recording practices are demonstrably improving. Case summaries are available on the majority of the children's files and provide a good overview of the case. The pen-picture of the child is child focused, and in the strongest cases these are completed with the children.

Quality assurance and management information have continued to improve in the last six months, giving leaders a clearer line of sight to practice. The audit tool has improved to include both a compliance and quality of practice element and is strengthened through a process of moderation from the quality assurance team. Learning from moderation is less effective when it is done, with a significant time lag from the audit. An increasing number of audits are undertaken collaboratively with social workers. However, the learning from audit and moderation is not always evidenced in supervision, which is a missed opportunity to ensure that audits are influencing practice development for staff and managers.

Since the ILACS inspection two and a half years ago, the now permanent senior leadership team has been engaged in a phased improvement programme supported and challenged by an improvement board chaired by the Department for Education (DfE) commissioner. The improvement to date has transformed the basic infrastructure of the service, leading to an improved front door service, a revamped

training programme, improved quality assurance and performance management, and significant financial investment to increase social work and managerial capacity.

Caseloads for most social workers in the child and family service are steadily reducing. In addition, successful succession planning has enabled permanent social workers to progress in their careers, introducing increasing levels of experience and skill in the system. Both these developments are very new, although there is already some positive impact, which can be seen in some children's cases.

Social workers told inspectors that senior managers are available and approachable and that their supervision is regular, providing a helpful space to talk and think about children's cases. However, the written record is not as successful in demonstrating this level of reflection.

Social workers are positive about working in Bradford and told inspectors that they value the new mandatory training programme, which they said was contributing to them producing better assessments, written records and plans. Team meetings are being used to further embed the learning from the training into practice.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Jan Edwards
Her Majesty's Inspector