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Dear Marium

Monitoring visit to Bradford children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Bradford children's services on 7 September 2021. This was the sixth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in October 2018. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Jan Edwards and Janet Fraser.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in strengthening practice for children in care. They focused particularly on weaknesses identified at the last inspection, and subsequent concerns raised from regulatory inspection of Bradford children's homes:

- permanence planning and decision-making for children in care
- placement stability, including sufficiency of homes for children
- placement decision-making and the commissioning of these arrangements
- unregulated and unregistered placements.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. This visit was carried out on site. Inspectors used a combination of video calls and in-person discussions with local authority staff, managers and leaders.

Headline findings

This is the sixth monitoring visit since the judgement inspection in 2018. Successive visits have reported a slow pace of change, reflecting a lack of traction in making concrete improvements to children's experiences. Furthermore the poor practice Ofsted identified in recent separate inspections of two of Bradford's children's homes,

resulting in a decision to suspend one home and rate the other 'inadequate'. These factors contributed to a decision by the Department for Education, in August 2021, to issue a statutory direction with a commissioner appointed to oversee expected improvements in services for children.

While significant weaknesses remain, actions that leaders have taken since the last monitoring visit in February 2020, which focused on children in care, have recently started to show some improvements in some areas. There has been improvement in the quality and frequency of children's review meetings, life-story work is taking place with more children, children are helped to achieve timely permanence through adoption and permanence tracking is now in place.

There is still much more to do to improve the consistency of practice and address continuing weaknesses in several key areas. In particular, the findings at this visit highlight the need to:

- urgently improve the standard of care provided in residential services
- improve the quality and effectiveness of commissioning of placements
- strengthen the effectiveness of corporate parenting
- improve the consistency of practice in care planning and managers' oversight and practice with children living at home under the jurisdiction of the court
- further stabilise the workforce and to reduce social workers' workloads; and
- strengthen the participation and the voice and influence of children and young people in helping to make improvements to the service.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Some children have continued to experience harm while in care. This corresponds with the serious safeguarding concerns raised through regulatory inspection about the ability of residential services to care safely for children in some of the local authority children's homes. However, for those children who have recently come into care this was an appropriate step to safeguard them, and for most children this was achieved at the right time. For some of these children, their new homes are meeting their needs.

In recent months, the availability of local authority-run residential homes has been affected by the closure of two of Bradford's own homes, which were failing to provide effective safeguarding and care. The additional impact for children was that they have continued to experience temporary moves due to inadequate assessment of their needs, inappropriate matching and insufficient suitable placement options. Furthermore, there has been a recent example of an unregistered provider being used. This exposed a child to serious risk of harm. These events demonstrate a failure on the part of Bradford senior leaders as the corporate parents for some of these children. Senior leaders have accepted that they have failed some children in

care and have instigated an urgent review of residential services, commissioning and unregulated placements.

A strong emphasis is placed on enabling children who cannot remain at home to live with extended family and friends. When children first come into care, while the option of living with family and friends are rightly explored, weaknesses in planning and rushed decision-making in some children's cases have resulted in inappropriate placements which quickly break down. Children experience too many unnecessary moves and a lack of early placement stability. Some children have had a lengthy route to their current placements and have experienced numerous breakdowns of placements.

Senior leaders have introduced a new care planning process to address the drift and delay, and poor care planning seen at the last monitoring visit that focused on children in care, in February 2020. While this is now becoming embedded, it is too soon to tell how this is affecting the effectiveness of care planning. Care plans remain too variable in quality. Some plans clearly identify children's wide-ranging needs based on updated assessments, but some plans are too vague and lack contingency plans, particularly when children's living situations are at risk of breaking down or risks increase. Children's review meetings have increased in frequency and are of better quality. Children attend their meetings when they wish to do so and share their views with either their independent reviewing officer, their social worker or carers, or through Viewpoint which is an app designed to help children share their views.

There is a shortage of suitable homes for children to live in when they come into care. There were 1,365 children in care at the time of this visit. Limited placement choice and lack of effective early matching mean that some children experience too many unsettling moves in the first 12 months of care and others are being moved too often, even after 12 months in care. As part of the service's approach to developing sufficient homes for children, leaders have recently introduced a nationally recognised fostering project to support children with complex needs. However, this fostering project is very new and its impact on improving placement choice was not evident at the time of this visit.

An impact of the shortage of suitable foster or residential homes in Bradford means that children are too often placed outside the borough. The demand for placements grew in summer 2020 and combined with a national shortage of placements, at the end of July 2021, 368 children were living out of Bradford and away from their families, friends and local communities. For some of these children, the decision to seek placements outside of Bradford is the right choice to address an identified need for specialist therapeutic care or is necessary to safeguard them. For too many children, however, these decisions are simply based on availability rather than assessed need.

Many children are not achieving permanence as early as they could. Delays in care proceedings are affected, not just by issues specific to the case such as court timetabling or expert assessments, but also by changes in social worker and the quality of the evidence. However, improved tracking and performance has resulted in more timely permanence for 31 children who have been placed for adoption in the last two quarters of the year.

Tracking of children in care proceedings and those with permanence plans is now better embedded, with regular meetings to monitor progress. Newly recruited court consultants provide effective support and challenge to social workers and managers and monitor this work. This is starting to show impact in preventing drift and delay. The court consultant's monthly report echoes some continuing fundamental weaknesses that inspectors saw in relation to care planning for babies and young children. Additional training to strengthen practice in this area is being implemented. There is also some evidence of the effectiveness of the work undertaken within the Public Law Outline in preventing escalation of children into court proceedings.

Many externally commissioned residential services provide therapeutic placements which are helping children to settle and to regulate their emotions, and this supports placement stability. The edge of care service is successfully supporting children to remain living at home or to return home from care, as well as those in foster or residential care. This includes clinical psychology, and specific therapies such as family therapy. Children are supported in their education and the virtual school is a persistent advocate for children's education and this includes for children who are living out of area.

Many children in care have experienced serious adverse experience, trauma and multiple rejection and loss. For those children, their emotional well-being needs are identified and services provided through existing provision or through other bespoke arrangements. Spot commissioning of therapeutic services has been introduced by leaders in response to waiting times for child and adolescent mental health services. Nevertheless, inspectors did see a small number of children whose mental health and well-being were not addressed.

Children are visited regularly, even when living at some distance. When self-isolation is required, social workers have maintained a connection to children through text messaging, cards, phone calls and video messaging. Family time is supported to meet children's needs for their continuing relationships with their brothers and sisters, parents and other family members.

Many children in Bradford are subject to care orders while living at home with their parents, including some children placed under the jurisdiction of the court (s38.6). The assessments of children living at home with their parents under s38.6 are weak. Managers are not providing oversight and direction, and visits to these children lack a clear purpose. Leaders are aware of these weaknesses in practice and are putting plans in place to improve practice.

Leaders have made life-story work a priority area for development as most children had not had this type of support. A new process and training for social workers to help children to understand the story of why they are in care have been implemented. More children are now receiving this vital help. For those who are too traumatised or who are at difficult life stages and not currently able to engage in this work, social workers are starting to collect information and store memories for when children are ready.

At the time of this visit, there were 89 children aged 16–17 years old placed in unregulated settings. Young people who are supported to live independently are being visited regularly in their homes. While supported accommodation was appropriate for those young people reviewed by inspectors, it is not easy to differentiate their care and support needs from the child's records. Furthermore, the quality assurance and oversight arrangements which have been recently developed are not clearly evident on children's individual case files. As a result of feedback from the visit, leaders intend to implement a clearer process to distinguish children's care and support needs, to inform decision-making and commissioning of these placements. Bradford Children's services reported that it currently has one child living in an unregistered setting following a court order. This child is now settled following a long period of instability and the risk he has been exposed to has lowered as a result of the support he is now receiving

A new range of quality assurance activity has been developed. While variability in how audits are conducted limits their value for the organisation, and is not yet leading to wholesale improvement, monthly audit reports are helping the service to identify weaknesses in social work practice and to focus learning and development.

Performance management systems have been refined, with better reporting to the improvement board supporting scrutiny and challenge through the vital signs performance information. The local authority's improvement plan, which is monitored on a six-weekly basis, is overly long and complex, making it difficult to focus on those priority areas that will bring about the greatest change. The additional action plan for residential services improvement has been appropriately added to the scrutiny of the improvement board.

Corporate parenting is underdeveloped and has lacked a proactive approach to advocacy and challenge on behalf of children and young people. Young people told inspectors that their involvement with, and influence on, their corporate parents has been limited, as they have not felt able to fully engage on an equal basis with adults in formal meetings. A very recent initiative changing the style of the meeting is welcomed by young people as likely to improve their ability to engage. Leaders have recognised the weaknesses in corporate parenting and are acting to develop the whole-council and partnership approach that has been lacking, and to enhance the voice and influence of children. This has not come soon enough.

Caseloads remain too high for some workers, particularly for workers in the long-term social work teams who hold children in care cases. This inhibits their ability to undertake the direct work they need to do to support children more effectively. Children and young people are still experiencing too many changes of social worker and inconsistency in care planning. This affects children being able to get to know their workers and the social workers getting to know them. Senior leaders understand that their ability to recruit and retain experienced social workers and in having manageable workloads is crucial to the success and acceleration of the improvement programme. Most social workers spoken to by inspectors said that morale was good and that they liked working for Bradford Children's services.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Jan Edwards
Her Majesty's Inspector