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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 2 to 3 February 2022. This was the seventh monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in September 2018. Her Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Louise Hollick and Joanna Warburton.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- Protection of vulnerable adolescents (contextual safeguarding).

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Headline findings

Since the last inspection in September 2018, the local authority has continued to coordinate a multi-agency response to exploitation. Children who are at risk of radicalisation continue to receive good support. The risk-assessment meeting (RAM) is an effective forum attended by a good range of operational partner agencies. However, the poor quality of some core social work practice in Bradford reduces the overall effectiveness of services offered to vulnerable children. This is exacerbated by a high turnover of staff and inconsistent management oversight. Not all social workers have had training and development in this particular area of work, which means that children receive an inconsistent response to identified risks.

Since the last monitoring visit, a new director of children's services has been appointed, and several new interim senior leadership appointments have been made. Following comments raised at the last monitoring visit, the new senior leadership team has responded quickly and has substantially revised the improvement plan. It is too early to evidence any significant improvements in the service as a result of these very recent appointments and changes.

Findings and evaluation of progress

The local authority has made a significant investment in statutory and voluntary services for exploited children across Bradford. Central to this investment is the development of a multi-agency child exploitation hub. The hub consists of specialist practitioners from social care, police and a range of statutory and voluntary partners. The hub works with local neighbourhood services, neighbouring local authorities and the wider community to reduce the risks of child exploitation throughout the city. Targeted work has focused on locations and businesses across the city where it is identified that children may be more vulnerable to exploitation. The hub is in its infancy, and there are plans underway to increase staffing and improve lines of communication across the partnership.

In most of the children's cases seen by inspectors, emerging risks arising from children's vulnerabilities are identified and risk-assessed promptly. This is ensuring that these children's needs are considered before they escalate into more serious contextual safeguarding risks. However, there is variable practice in the quality of exploitation risk assessments and, in some children's records seen during the visit, the assessments do not always adequately consider the child's history, previous social worker involvement and wider family impact and influence. This limits their effectiveness in enabling an understanding of the full range of the child's risks and vulnerabilities.

When children are assessed as at risk of exploitation, they are considered at the daily RAM in the children's exploitation hub. The RAM is an effective forum attended by a good range of operational partner agencies. In particular, the RAM provides good information sharing and discussion opportunities and is effective in challenging risk assessments and, where appropriate, escalating the level of risk where the social-work assessment is weak. Decisions made in the RAM regarding level of risk for children are appropriate. Recommended actions arising are relevant to the identified risks and needs.

The multi-agency input in the RAM enables actions relevant to other agencies to be agreed. This means that children's unmet needs in relation to education and physical and emotional health are given consideration in this meeting. Children identified as at high risk of exploitation are allocated a dedicated police officer to support them and to share information and intelligence with their social worker. This ensures joined-up working and prompt responses when children go missing from home or care or when they experience abuse through exploitation.

While the RAM is effective in identifying risk and need, the effectiveness is weakened because actions set at the RAM are not consistently followed through by social workers and frontline managers or linked with the child's broader needs under child-in-need, child-protection or child-in-care planning. The poor quality of practice in some of the children's cases seen by inspectors, and inconsistent management oversight, mean that most children's plans do not address all of their identified needs or risks. This means that many children at risk of exploitation also continue to

experience risks in relation to their home circumstances, such as domestic abuse or parental substance abuse.

There are a number of effective non-statutory services in Bradford that offer direct and tailored support to children and families where exploitation is a feature. These services are highly valued and in demand. Some of these services are experiencing a backlog for allocation to a worker. This means some children have to wait for an allocated worker to begin direct work with them and for their circumstances to improve.

Too many children at risk of exploitation have poor school attendance. Leaders report a range of monitoring systems, including for vulnerable children with complex needs, who are in care or preparing for adulthood. An education safeguarding officer role has been developed in the exploitation hub, to link with schools and improve attendance for vulnerable adolescents. Despite this, inspectors found many children at risk of exploitation with low school attendance and a lack of professional understanding to address this. Not attending school significantly increases children's vulnerability to abuse through exploitation and going missing from home.

When children's risks around exploitation do not decrease, they are escalated from the RAM to the multi-agency child-exploitation (MACE) meeting that is held six-weekly and includes a range of strategic partners. This meeting monitors and reviews children who are at high risk of exploitation. MACE has the ability to agree additional interventions for individual children with unmet needs and this leads to positive outcomes for some children. The broader corporate and partnership challenge and influence are limited and, by their own admission, the panel needs invigorating and the lines of communication need improving. There is a disconnection between the MACE strategic group and the operational team in the exploitation hub. This is a missed opportunity to ensure that themes and intelligence are shared with strategic partners.

The majority of children who go missing from home or care receive an effective and prompt response. Performance data indicates reductions in the overall numbers of missing children and episodes of going missing from home or care month on month over the past year. The Philomena Protocol, which provides prompt information about children when they go missing from care, is widely implemented. Missing-from-care officers from the exploitation hub complete return home interviews for children in care, while other children receive an interview from a commissioned service. While there is a good level of discussion with children in these interviews around the circumstances of the missing episode, recommendations are often too generic and therefore limit effectiveness in contributing to the overall plan for the child.

There is insufficient frontline manager oversight of children's cases and risk assessment following initial allocation of the child's case for assessment. Some individual managers provide some good oversight and reflective supervision. Overall, social workers do not consistently receive the direction, challenge and reflection they

need to fully understand risk and be professionally curious and drive progress in children's plans and outcomes. This is affected by the turnover of managers.

In July 2021, The Bradford Safeguarding Partnership published a thematic child safeguarding review of child sexual exploitation. The local authority has worked with strategic partners to implement the recommendations from the review and develop an action plan. One of the key actions from the plan relating to training for all professionals has not been fully completed and some social workers told inspectors that their busy caseloads have prevented them attending training. This means that not all social workers are skilled and confident in identifying and assessing risks for vulnerable adolescents.

Inspectors spoke to some highly committed and resilient social workers during the visit. They spoke warmly about the children they work with and are able to build positive relationships with most vulnerable adolescents, despite often being newly allocated to them. Many children experience several changes of social worker and this is a barrier to establishing enduring and trusting relationships that promote sustainable improvements in their lives.

The continued high turnover of staff is a barrier to sustained service-wide improvement. There is a programme of recruitment underway and an academy for newly qualified social workers is in development. However, neither addresses the immediate and ongoing challenges of having an assured permanent workforce in Bradford.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Louise Hollick
Her Majesty's Inspector