

16 November 2022

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Dear Jeanette

Monitoring visit to Bury children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Bury children's services on 12 and 13 October 2022. This was the second monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in November 2021. His Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Lisa Walsh and Julie Knight.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas identified as needing improvement at the last inspection:

- Children in need.
- Children subject to a child protection plan.
- Pre-proceedings work.
- The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families.
- The local authority's own evaluation of the quality and impact of performance and practice.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. A range of evidence was considered, including electronic records, performance management information, case file audits and other information provided by senior managers. In addition, inspectors spoke to social workers and managers.

Headline findings

Since the last inspection, there are some pockets of improvement in service delivery for children and families in Bury. The local authority is beginning to improve the experiences for children who are subject to child in need and child protection planning. This is supported by increased stability in the senior leadership team,

continued corporate support and financial investment. However, high caseloads and too many changes in social workers are still leading to inconsistency in practice for too many children.

There is a refreshed quality assurance framework, along with a renewed focus on developing a performance management culture, but this is not yet embedded. There is a continued high turnover of social workers, which makes any improvements difficult to embed. The quality and frequency of managers' supervision continue to be variable, which means that sufficient rigour is not always applied in progressing children's plans or in challenging poorer practice when circumstances for children are not improving. Actions to progress cases are not always being completed.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Since the last monitoring visit, senior leaders have continued to focus on establishing the foundations for improving practice. Some progress is being made, but it is too early to make a difference to children's experiences. Leaders recognise that there is much more to do to make sustainable improvements in the quality of social work practice. A more stable leadership team, along with the recruitment of a permanent director of social care practice, has renewed positivity among the workforce. This is supporting a clarity of vision, standards, and expectations.

There is strong political and corporate support that has led to significant additional investment in children's services. There is a strengthened recruitment and retention strategy that includes an enhanced offer to attract and retain staff. A number of new posts at strategic and operational level are providing better stability and greater line of sight on front-line practice. In addition, funding has been secured to increase the number of team managers and social workers in order to increase capacity and strengthen front-line practice.

An appropriate and refreshed quality assurance framework provides leaders and senior managers with a line of sight on practice. Auditors and moderators are mostly consistent in understanding what good practice looks like. Audits are balanced in identifying positive practice and areas for development. However, feedback from families, is not consistently audited to ensure compliance with this quality standard. Actions from audits do not consistently support case direction or learning about individual children for social workers or the local authority. This reduces an overall understanding of children's experiences to support improvement.

Social workers report that senior managers are visible and have recently taken a more restorative approach to their engagement, including better consultation with social workers to support in-service improvements. Social workers and managers report that leaders now have a real focus on improving services for children. Despite this, in the safeguarding teams, some social workers' caseloads are too high, which has an impact on their ability to keep children's records up to date. This results in

key decisions for children not always being fully recorded on their records, and opportunities for team managers to review children's progress are reduced.

Supervision is mostly regular and social workers value the support they receive from their team managers. However, most supervision records are not reflective and actions are too generic and lack timescales for completion. Managers do not consistently provide appropriate challenge where children's plans are delayed. Contingency planning, to inform next steps when children's circumstances do not improve, is absent for most children.

Some children continue to experience too many changes of social worker, which contributes to significant drift and delay in progressing their plans. When children do have a consistent social worker, they are visited regularly and are able to develop positive, meaningful relationships.

There is an improving use of multi-agency information to understand risks and inform decision-making in assessments for some children. This includes assessments for disabled children. Family history is being used more readily to understand children's current experiences. Relevant multi-agency information is included and is helping to inform risk analysis and planning for children.

Thresholds of risk are clear and applied appropriately when decisions are being made to step-up and step-down between early help, children in need and child protection.

Most children have an up-to-date plan. However, plans are variable in quality, with some being too generic and without timescales. Actions do not always provide families with information about what needs to change and by when. This means that children's individual needs are not consistently met in a timely way. Where plans are better quality, direct work is completed in order to understand children's experiences to inform future planning. For most children when their circumstances change and risks increase, there is appropriate and timely escalation from children in need to child protection processes.

Although there is regular attendance by key professionals at core group meetings and child protection conferences, which is supporting sound decision-making, these meetings are not always effective forums for holding partners to account for not completing actions which would reduce risk or meet children's needs. More recently, there are some positive examples of case escalation to address drift and delay. This is beginning to have an impact on progressing those children's plans.

Inspectors saw timelier progress being made for some children who are subject to child protection planning and recently entering pre-proceedings. Children whose cases have been open longer to the service are now actively reviewed through regular legal gateway meetings. The progress of these plans is closely monitored by senior managers.

Senior managers have established clear practice standards that are supporting social workers to develop consistent practice in pre-proceedings work. The number of children escalated into pre-proceedings has doubled since the last inspection. This means that when children's lives are not improving, more children benefit from earlier decision-making and appropriate escalation. When children's circumstances improve, they are appropriately supported to remain safely at home, having stepped down from pre-proceedings. A positive development is the introduction of the pre-proceedings plan, enabling families to have a clearer understanding of expectations.

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

Yours sincerely

Lisa Walsh
His Majesty's Inspector