

16 May 2024

Marium Haque
Strategic Director of Children's Services at Bradford Council
Margaret McMillan Tower
Princes Way
Bradford
BD1 1NN

cc. Charlotte Ramsden, Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Bradford Children and Families Trust.

Dear Marium

Monitoring visit to Bradford Children and Families Trust.

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Bradford Children and Families Trust on the 27 and 28 February 2024. This was the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in November 2022, and the eleventh monitoring visit since Bradford Children's Services was judged inadequate in 2018. Bradford children's services transferred to Bradford Children and Families Trust on the 1 April 2023. This is the third monitoring visit under the new arrangements. His Majesty's inspectors for this visit were lead inspector, Ceri Evans, and Jo Warburton, team inspector.

Areas covered by the visit

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

- Children subject to a letter before proceedings and the quality and impact of pre-proceedings interventions.

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

Headline findings

Since the last inspection, the response to pre-proceedings under the Public Law Outline (PLO) is starting to improve from a low base. The Trust has appropriate strategic intent and active plans to reduce the long-standing drift and delay children have experienced, and continue to experience in having their long-term futures safely secured. There is ongoing work to improve the pre-proceedings process. Senior leaders have a stronger grip on children's progress through the development of a new PLO workflow. Front line management oversight has been strengthened

and social workers are being better supported to assess risk and develop realistic and time-bound plans for children's circumstances to improve.

Positively, senior leaders within the Trust, alongside those within the council have a thorough understanding of the issues and what needs to improve in this area of practice. The appointment of the new CEO at the council is bringing strong and crucial oversight, support and challenge to the Trust and the council. This is helping to ensure that the direction of travel is now the right one for children in this practice area.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Trust senior leaders recognise that for too many children, their long-term futures have been uncertain for too long. Many children have been subject to child protection and PLO planning for a considerable length of time. The long history of inadequate practice across children's social care, which pre-dates the Trust, has resulted in delays in action being taken when the local authority is concerned about a child's safety and well-being. Trust leaders fully understand the challenges in this practice area and the impact on children. They have taken very positive and robust action to begin to make the improvements needed.

Positively, more recent practice is beginning to show signs of improvement. When there are concerns about a child's safety, more decisive action is now taken when children's circumstances have not improved through child protection planning or when risks escalate. Thresholds which trigger PLO are now appropriate and are understood by social workers and managers. Where children have been subject to lengthy child protection planning and/or PLO, their plans are being reviewed and reassessed. Regular legal gateway meetings chaired by a senior manager are helping to ensure that senior managers have oversight of key decision-making. This is ensuring that more recent applications to court are made swiftly, and that all safe and appropriate alternatives have been explored to avoid harmful delay.

Some children in Bradford have experienced many changes of social workers. This has resulted in their assessments stopping and starting when social workers change. This results in an inability for children and their families to develop a relationship with a social worker. Positively, the landscape is starting to change, with an increasing number of permanent staff within this practice area. Social workers are being better supported by leaders and managers to understand children's experiences and identify risk. In most of the children's cases seen during this visit, inspectors found that more recent assessments of parents and extended family are completed in children's timescales and the quality of some assessments is improving. Where appropriate and safe, children are supported to remain within their family network.

There is increasing evidence that children and families are being helped sooner in order to bring about positive changes. Parents are being better supported to make improvements to their parenting before care proceedings are issued. While this is

evidence of progress, not all children who have been subject to lengthy child protection planning or PLO are benefiting. This is due to the longevity of practice and previous management shortfalls, which has had a profoundly detrimental impact on the lives of many children.

Leaders have recently implemented very clear guidance for staff and managers that sets out the expectations and timescales for work to be completed and the quality standards required in PLO. One example is the quality and timeliness of letters before proceedings. In the main, more recent letters before proceedings are now plainly written, appropriately authoritative and sensitive. They explicitly outline to parents what needs to happen, by when and what support they will receive. There continues to be some variability in quality where professional language and jargon are used. This limits parents' opportunity to make changes and to understand the consequence of care proceedings. More recent practice does show that letters are now promptly completed by workers following decisions being made by the legal gateway panel that the public law outline process is to be initiated.

Engagement with children and families is improving. Inspectors saw many examples of direct work happening with children and their families. Senior leaders are supporting social workers to use a range of tools and activities to help them to better understand children's experiences. While some children are benefiting, the quality of direct work is not yet consistent. Children's views are not always reflected in their plans and records. During pre-proceedings social workers are developing safety plans intended to reduce and manage risk. While these plans are developed closely with parents, not all safety plans fully explore risks or help parents to understand their child's lived experience. The quality of records of visits to children varies considerably. Some records are very brief and do not reflect the purpose of the visit or what progress children are making, whereas others are very comprehensive and clearly demonstrate what life is like for the child and what needs to happen to help them.

The processes for stepping down from pre-proceedings are understood and carefully applied by social workers with robust management oversight to ratify the decision. Social workers now receive regular supervision, but the recording of supervision has a compliance focus rather than helping the social worker to consider the child's progress, reduce delay or drive forward plans for children.

At the time of this visit, social workers spoken to told inspectors that they feel more settled and are better supported in their work. They describe visible senior leaders who are very approachable. A number commented that the relationship-based model of social work which has been introduced is becoming more embedded and that Bradford feels a more stable place to work. Social workers said that they appreciate the majority of training is now delivered face to face and how this improves their learning experience.

Notably leaders are beginning to make improvements in this practice area by being clear about expected standards, leading by example, and continually monitoring performance data and other information. Strengthened quality assurance frameworks are used effectively in order to help leaders influence improvement. Case management audits are being carried out on a regular basis. Social workers are now routinely involved in case audits, which aids their learning and helps to improve practice in a way that benefits children. Leaders acknowledge that further improvement is needed as case audits currently focus too much on processes and compliance rather than exploring impact or outcomes for children.

Trust leaders are investing time to build key relationships with partners and with staff. Leaders recognise they are having to work hard to restore confidence in social work practice, particularly within the family courts. Leaders are developing regular meetings with partner agencies, and this collaborative approach is helping to resolve any issues early and help explain their context. This is enabling partner agencies to become fully involved in the improvement agenda.

Leaders recognise that access to some services for families, such as family group conferences and outreach support, have long waiting lists. This means there are delays in getting support from within the wider family networks. Leaders are working to mitigate against this through access to in-house community resource workers but recognise this is not meeting the required needs of children and families.

There are undoubtedly significant resource and capacity challenges which impact on work in this practice area and across the Trust. The newly appointed CEO at the council clearly understands the challenges, recognises the importance of children's social care and is already bringing strong and crucial oversight, support and challenge to the trust and the council. This, together with the trust and the council's commitment to make the improvements needed, is helping to ensure that the direction of travel is now the right one for children in this practice area while recognising there is still much more to do.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Ceri Evans
His Majesty's Inspector