

12 July 2024

Marium Haque
Strategic Director of Children's Services at Bradford Council
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cc. Charlotte Ramsden, Chief Executive Officer, 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's Services on 22 and 23 May 2024. This was the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in November 2022, and the 12th monitoring visit since Bradford Children's Services was judged inadequate in 2018. Bradford Council Children's Services' statutory functions were delegated to Bradford Children and Families Trust on 1 April 2023. This is the fourth monitoring visit under the new arrangements. His Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Ceri Evans and Michelle Edge.

Areas covered by the visit

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

- Early permanence for children in care.
- The timeliness and effectiveness of plans for permanence.
- The quality of management oversight and supervision, including the oversight of independent reviewing officers (IROs).

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

The trust has continued to make notable progress in improving services for Bradford's children in this discrete area of practice. Senior leaders in the trust, alongside those in the council, have a thorough understanding of the issues and

what needs to improve in this area of the service. There is a renewed focus on strengthening early permanence for children, with several new initiatives, including greater tracking, revised practice frameworks and renewed permanence policies.

The long history of weakness in this practice area has contributed to delay for children in progressing their plans for permanence. However, more recent practice is beginning to show signs of improvement and positive impact for some children. A stable senior leadership team is now in place and the recruitment of permanent heads of service and team managers has brought about much needed stability. There has been significant financial and practical investment in stabilising the workforce, which is now starting to have a positive impact on staff morale and the quality and effectiveness of decision-making for children. Children are benefiting from safer and more effective social work in this practice area. Senior leaders have introduced effective lines of accountability and understand what service improvements are still required.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Since the last inspection, senior leaders have established systems and new initiatives, such as renewing tracking processes and implementing a permanence panel. These changes are giving senior leaders a good understanding of the impact of practice on children's experiences in this practice area. Senior leaders recognise these initiatives are relatively new and have yet to have a significant impact on securing timely permanence for all children.

For those children who have recently entered care, their need for permanence is well considered. An increasing number of children now have a permanence plan, with clear outcomes and timeliness measures that are monitored effectively. For those children who have been looked after for long lengths of time, many continue to experience delay in their need for permanence to be planned and secured. This includes children where kinship arrangements or special guardianship orders could be secured.

Positively, the number of children coming into care is steadily reducing. Most children now come into care at a time that is right for them. When children become accommodated under section 20 of the Children Act 1989, the oversight and recording of the initial decision-making are now robust. The planning that follows is also improving and is helping to ensure that children only remain subject to these arrangements for a short length of time where appropriate.

When children enter care, they live in kinship care in their community and with their brothers and sisters, whenever possible. Social workers are better supported by their managers to identify alternative carers who may be able to care for the children. Family group conferences are used well to facilitate the exploration of family-based solutions.

Historically, Bradford has seen a high number of children in care living with parents under full care orders for lengthy periods. Recent data and inspection of some of these former arrangements show that this is steadily and safely reducing. Senior leaders are robustly reviewing these arrangements to safely revoke care orders where safe to do so. Greater senior leader oversight means that some children can now live with their parents, when it is safe to do so, and without the unnecessary intervention of children's services or with continued lower-level support.

Assessments of children's needs are carried out routinely, but they vary in quality. They do not always provide the detail or an appropriate analysis to understand children's holistic and emerging needs, particularly those with complex family histories. This hinders appropriate permanence planning.

Since the last inspection of children's social care in November 2022, there has been improved oversight of children's plans by IROs. Children's reviews continue to be held in a timely way and face to face. The IROs involve children wherever possible and ensure that their voices are heard. Reviews are increasingly setting recommendations with timescales for completion. Review minutes are mostly clear and address the child directly in a way that will help the child to understand the decisions made about their lives now or in the future. The IROs are also making better use of formal dispute resolution processes by escalating concerns about drift and delay for children to managers. The recording of informal challenges to managers is less clear. This makes it difficult for senior leaders to track the effectiveness of the informal dispute process or the difference this is making for children.

Some children have experienced several changes of social worker due to the high turnover of staff. This has had a negative impact on the progress of some children's plans and on the ability of children and social workers to form relationships. Positively, this is also an improving picture. There are recent indicators of improved workforce stability, and turnover has reduced significantly. This is leading to better continuity for children.

Social workers visit children regularly, in line with written plans, and children are seen alone where appropriate. However, the recording of visits does not enable managers to ascertain what observations or discussions occurred, or what progress the child may or may not be making.

There has been some recent improvement in the quality of life-story work for some children. Inspectors saw examples of creative life-story work to help children to understand their individual circumstances. This is not consistent for all children living in long-term placements. Senior leaders are aware that this remains an important area for improvement.

Senior leaders recognise that there is much more to do to ensure that children benefit from living in a range of placements that meet their individual needs. They are working to increase the number of local placements available for children. Leaders have recently introduced a placement review panel to ensure that there is more rigorous oversight of external residential placements and to ensure that children receive the right support in line with their needs. The future aim is to minimise the need for children to be placed in external residential care or at a distance from Bradford unless there is a clear reason why it would be in their best interests.

Social work caseloads have reduced in this practice area. Social workers spoken to during the visit said that this reduction has had a positive impact on the quality of their work and their ability to complete specific tasks within the required timescales.

Most staff receive regular supervision. However, supervision is not always sufficiently reflective and the recording is variable. Despite this, social workers told inspectors that supervision is helpful and supports their learning. Individual supervision is often supplemented through regular team meetings and informal group supervision. In the absence of quality written records and evidence of review of subsequent supervision decisions, it is not possible to triangulate this.

Most social workers spoken with during the visit said that there has been a recent cultural shift, that morale is better and that workers are feeling happier and more supported at all levels. Some social workers told inspectors that they are proud to be part of the improvement journey.

Senior leaders in the trust and council have a clear understanding of the strengths and areas for further development in this area of practice. They are highly visible to staff. Regular face-to-face meetings between the trust, chief executive, the director of children's services and elected members are informed by relevant and up-to-date performance information. This is enabling transparent and constructive scrutiny of performance in this practice area, particularly children's experiences. This helps to ensure that all leaders have a shared understanding about what needs to improve across the service.

The quality assurance process continues to develop. Senior leaders know that there is more to do to increase the audit return rate and strengthen the quality assurance process. Nevertheless, the number of audits currently carried out is contributing to their understanding of practice quality. Trends and themes from these audits are used effectively to inform the training and development programme. Social workers are appropriately involved in the audits to support their understanding of what constitutes good practice. Senior leaders are aware of the need for audits to better evidence the impact of practice on the experiences of the child. There are realistic plans in place to address this.

I am sending a copy of this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Ceri Evans
His Majesty's Inspector