

13 March 2025

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

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

Dear Marium

Monitoring visit to Bradford children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Bradford children's services on 11 and 12 February 2025. This was the fifth 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. His Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Brenda McLaughlin and Rachel Fairhurst.

Areas covered by the visit

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

- Timeliness, quality and impact of permanence decisions for children who have been in care for over four months.
- The quality of plans and planning for children in care who are unable to live safely with their birth parents.

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

Headline findings

Decisive, child-centred action by leaders at all levels is increasingly securing permanent homes for children who cannot live safely with their parents. Most children come into care when this is the right action to keep them safe and ensure that their needs are properly met. A prompt response and recognition of risk means that children who have been in care over four months have a permanence plan recorded. Stability of leadership, and a strong culture of prioritising children in care, is underpinned by effective systems and processes to track children's progress. Leaders have an accurate understanding of children's needs. Targeted improvement plans, effective performance management and audit systems, supported by reliable

real-time data, are driving continuous improvement and compliance with expected practice standards. This is leading to appropriate decisions in meeting most children's immediate needs but also in effective planning for their future. Strong efforts are made for children to live within their extended family. Where possible, children remain together with brothers and sisters. Prompt assessment of kinship carers and consideration of special guardians to secure permanence is positive. These are substantial improvements but the legacy of poor practice, churn of staff in some teams and ongoing challenges in the sufficiency of placements impacts the quality and consistency of practice for some children.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Leaders have created a culture of urgency, ensuring that children's right to live in safe and caring stable homes if they cannot live with their families is prioritised. Effective oversight in the pre-proceedings process of the Public Law Outline means that care proceedings are issued in a timely way, and assessment of family members are 'front loaded', which is reducing delay for children. There are plans to strengthen this further by increasing the frequency of family group conferences so that family members are included in permanence decisions. The development of a pre-birth panel to assess the needs of vulnerable parents and their unborn babies supports timely and permanent decisions following birth.

At the time of the visit, 60 children under the age of 12 years old and some as young as six were living in children's homes. Social workers spoke with passion and warmth about these children and were able to demonstrate positive progress and experiences that they are having in their placements. The legacy of delay in progressing plans for these young children is being addressed, but leaders recognise that the pace of change for these children needs to accelerate in line with their assessed needs. They have credible plans in place to drive these changes.

Social workers visit children in care in line with the Trust's prescribed timescales, but this is not always in line with the child's plan or level of need. Leaders accept that more work is needed to support social workers' ability to carry out purposeful direct work with children at their pace and bespoke to their assessed needs to help children understand their care journey. Increasingly, children's voices are captured well in assessments and in plans. Most assessments are detailed and thorough and are updated for statutory reviews. Most children are supported to see people who are important to them and relevant resources are in place to ensure this is safe and appropriate.

Children are supported to participate in planning for their care, informing timely decisions. They benefit from timely statutory reviews that are well attended by people who are important to children, including their parents. An inclusive approach with the multi-agency partnership is helping to ensure children's needs are being met more quickly and permanence decisions are made at the earliest opportunity.

Independent review officers (IROs) maintain effective oversight of children's progress through mid-point reviews with social workers. This additional scrutiny reduces delay for children and is a significant improvement. For instance, prompt health assessments and bespoke personal education plans mean that children's well-being and progress are regularly checked and the need for additional support or services is identified and responded to. Following reviews, IROs write directly to children, helping them to understand their care journey and decisions that have been made that affect their lives. While plans make clear how children's needs will be met, contingency planning is not consistently in place.

Effective strategic and operational work by the virtual school staff to develop good relationships across schools and with other local authorities helps to bring swift resolution to any educational barriers. The virtual school is included in placement planning and decisions about placement moves. Staff at the virtual school have access to the Trust's recording systems and provide information to statutory reviews and care plans. They quality assure all personal education plans.

Currently, children in care remain allocated to social workers in the locality teams and, subject to the needs of the child, usually transfer to the children in care teams at the conclusion of care proceedings. Social workers in the locality teams are responsible for children in need and those subject to child protection plans. In addition, they are responsible for completing special guardianship assessments during care proceedings and providing support to children on care orders living with parents in circumstances where the care order can quickly be discharged and for children whose plan is for adoption. Despite the efforts and commitment of locality social workers, the complexity and volume of work they are responsible for is having a detrimental impact on the quality of safe practice with some of the children reviewed. This was evident in several children's cases of concern inspectors referred back to leaders during the visit. Leaders are cognisant of the pressures in these teams and are actively reviewing the most appropriate solutions. Additional resources for the special guardianship offer have already been agreed by leaders in the Trust which will lead to those assessments not being completed in localities.

The increasing proportion of children entering care with highly complex needs remains a significant challenge and contributes to the number of children who experience multiple placement moves. This is exacerbated by the legacy of inadequate practice, which is taking time to rectify. Processes to monitor the safety and planning for children living in unregistered placements and support to providers to register with Ofsted have been strengthened. Most of these children have complex needs and have experienced extensive childhood trauma, many changes in placement and changes in social workers. In addition, many children in unregistered homes are at risk of sexual and criminal exploitation and are often missing from care. Children in these arrangements are visited weekly, and managers appropriately review risk frequently and convene multi-agency child protection strategy meetings to evaluate cumulative and emerging risks. Leaders accept that

more work is needed to analyse and evidence whether the interventions by the numerous professionals involved are making a difference for these children. They have recently introduced a placement review panel to ensure that there is more rigorous oversight of externally commissioned 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. They are working closely with Bradford providers to secure appropriate placements for these children.

Supervision and management oversight is mostly regular. In stronger cases, evidence of management oversight on assessments provides a clear rationale as to whether recommendations are agreed. Leaders accept that supervision could be strengthened by an analysis of the progress achieved, for example whether change is evident and being sustained because of the intervention and plans.

A successful ongoing programme of recruitment and retention has increased the numbers of permanent qualified social workers and managers, providing the foundations for further improvements. The children in care teams now have 53 permanent staff members compared with 23 in 2024. Senior leaders have worked diligently to develop and support a culture of continuous learning and improvement. All staff spoke positively about working in Bradford. They feel valued by visible and approachable managers and leaders. They spoke positively about the child-centred 'atmosphere'. Staff appreciate that stability of leadership is making a difference as they understand the rationale for decisions and report that they are consulted and feel listened to.

Leaders have consciously created a supportive environment and have adopted a model of practice that places children's need for a secure and safe home at the centre of permanence decisions. Strong governance arrangements and performance systems are firmly in place to track progress. Leaders' passion to do the right thing for children in care is tangible. Leaders are realistic and understand what needs to happen to ensure that services for all children in care continue to improve. Despite the many remaining challenges, improvements since the last inspection visit have continued.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Brenda McLaughlin
His Majesty's Inspector