

# SCRUTINY REPORT



**MEETING:** Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee

**DATE:** 4<sup>th</sup> November

**SUBJECT:** Peer Review of Childrens Services and Response

**REPORT FROM:** Councillor Tariq, Cabinet Member for Childrens Services

**CONTACT OFFICER:** Sandra Bruce Assistant Director Early Help and School Readiness

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## 1.0 BACKGROUND

1.1 In July 2021, the Executive Director for Childrens Services invited the Local Government Association to carry out a Peer Challenge of Bury's Childrens Services. Peer challenges are delivered by experienced peers and the makeup of the team reflects the focus of the challenge, set out by the Local Authority. Due to the pandemic and restrictions, the Challenge was completed virtually.

1.2 The scope of the Challenge was wide ranging and looked at several areas.

- Understanding of levels of need with a focus on consistency of threshold application- between Early Help and Social Care
- Effectiveness of recruitment of social work staff
- The impact of quality assurance, management oversight and performance
- Provision of quality placements for children looked after and care leavers
- Effectiveness of Corporate Parenting to support children in care and care leavers in achieving good outcomes
- Effectiveness of, child protection plans, case reviews and case closures including re-referral rates and, repeat child protection plans
- Capacity within the Council to provide an effective infrastructure for Childrens Services that can deliver transformation and improvement

1.3 The fundamental aim of a Peer Challenge is to help Councils and their partners reflect on and improve the impact of services to children and young people. It provides a critical friend to challenge the Council and its partners in assessing their strengths and identifying areas for improvement. The main elements of the challenge were.

- A review of data and key documentation provided by the Council
- A review of case records – 20 records from across service areas, Early Help, Front Door to Social Care, Initial Response Teams, Child in Need, Child Protection and Looked After Children. Case records were reviewed remotely on 12<sup>th</sup> June

- Virtual interviews and focus groups. From the week commencing the 12<sup>th</sup> of July the Peer Challenge team were 'on site' and carried out interviews and focus groups
- The final report was circulated on 2<sup>nd</sup> September

1.4 This report summarises the key findings from the Peer Challenge, both the strengths and issues raised, along with the recommendations. Latterly the report provides an update on how the Council and specifically Childrens Services has responded to findings and the actions it has taken, thus far

1.5 At the end of the report is an appendix with a table with some key Childrens Services data to provide a context for members of the current activity across the service

## **2.0 ISSUES**

### **Findings from the Peer Challenge**

#### **2.1 Early Help (Understanding needs and threshold)**

Early help is the support provided to families to prevent escalation of children into Social Care Services. Early help is defined in statutory guidance:

*Local organisations and agencies should have in place effective ways to identify emerging problems and potential unmet needs of individual children and families. Local authorities should work with organisations and agencies to develop joined-up early help services based on a clear understanding of local needs. This requires all practitioners, including those in universal services and those providing services to adults with children, to understand their role in identifying emerging problems and to share information with other practitioners to support early identification and assessment*

*A lead practitioner should undertake the assessment, provide help to the child and family, act as an advocate on their behalf and co-ordinate the delivery of support services. A GP, family support worker, school nurse, teacher, health visitor and/or special educational needs co-ordinator could undertake the lead practitioner role*

*Local areas should have a comprehensive range of effective, evidence-based services in place to address assessed needs early.*

*In addition to high quality support in universal services, specific local early help services will typically include family and parenting programmes, assistance with health issues, including mental health, responses to emerging thematic concerns in extra-familial contexts, and help for emerging problems relating to domestic abuse, drug or alcohol misuse by an adult or a child.*

2.2 In Bury, as with other Greater Manchester Authorities and in line with guidance, early help is seen as an approach both delivered by partners as well as some resource sitting within the Council. Council early help is delivered through three Locality Early Help teams covering the Borough, each is linked to clusters of schools and nurseries -this allows the teams to build relationships

with those providers who see and work with most children and families and have the most regular contact with them.

At any one time there are approximately 1000 children supported through early help, with 60% of cases being led by council staff and 40% led by other partners (some with support from council practitioners)

At the heart of Bury's early help offer is the Team Around the School approach, a validated approach developed through the Stockport Family Model and being implemented across several Greater Manchester councils. This approach links early help practitioners with schools to develop strong relationships and hold regular Team around the School meetings which are used to determine support for families, as needs emerge. This builds on our schools being a universal provider for all children and ensures that needs are met at the earliest possible opportunity.

- 2.3 The Peer Challenge found that Bury has real ambition around its investment in early help to reduce long term demand on social care services and the approach fits well with the Bury 2030 Strategy, delivering services locally and through relationships with families and strengthening communities. This approach was launched in November 2019, 5 months prior to full lockdown and the Peer Challenge recognised that this had impeded some progress in developing the relationships with schools and in the community to deliver this at pace. Currently 60 schools are involved but this is growing as the locality teams reach out and make links with their school clusters. As schools opened again in September we have been reaching out and working with them to try to identify and support families who have emerging needs at the earliest opportunity.
- 2.4 The Peer team also provided challenge around some specific areas. It suggested the Council review how it targets its early help resource and determine whether this is having the impact on reducing demand on social care. It questioned whether partners were confident in taking on the role of lead with families and if not, why this was the case and how this could be supported. The team suggested the Council review the interface between early help and referral into social care both in terms of how threshold for access to higher needs services was being applied and whether it was understood across the partnership and, clarity on how families step up into social care or, step down to early help once the service from social care ends.
- 2.5 **Social Work Practice. Children in Need, Children in Need of Protection and Looked After Children**

This part of the challenge reviewed how families are referred into social care as well as the quality of practice. In Bury, families are referred through a single point of access called the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) Prior to the pandemic the MASH was located in Bury Police Station and included police, social workers, education welfare, health practitioner and business support but, it experienced a significant level of disruption through the pandemic with staff having to leave the station and work from home. The strength of any MASH is, in part the relationships created when professionals of different disciplines sit together and reflect on decisions and approach, in response to contacts concerning some of Burys most vulnerable children including those who require immediate protection.

- 2.6 Despite this the peer challenge team saw effective partnerships in the MASH and noted that systems had been streamlined and most cases were dealt with in one day. The Team saw some good examples of the application of the social work practice model -Signs of Safety which is a strength-based model of intervention that looks to what is working well in families, building on those assets rather than applying a deficit approach which focuses on what is going 'wrong'. The Peer Challenge saw that there were development sessions happening with social workers to embed this way of working and this was reflected to the team in some of the focus groups and discussions.

There were also challenges highlighted. The Peer team saw high caseloads which can impede practitioners' ability to practice well, as the volume of work can force practitioners to react rather than to reflect and plan more effectively with families which can result in some delays for children. Ultimately high case loads can result in children remaining in harmful situations for longer.

- 2.7 The peer challenge found that Bury has high aspirations for its children in care and benefits from a workforce that is passionate and highly motivated. Pockets of innovative practice were seen, and services were deemed generally effective. The peer team however offered some challenge in respect of advocacy for children in care and the need for members to strengthen their understanding of corporate parenting responsibilities, including induction arrangements.
- 2.8 Whilst there was evidence of good working relationships between the Council and other partners in meeting the needs of children in care, there was a challenge made in respect of the offer to children leaving care and of the insufficient housing available to them- care leavers told the Peer team that they did not always feel safe in their housing provision. The Team challenged the Council on how it develops its commissioning arrangements together, to secure better provision.

## 2.9 **Quality Assurance, Management Oversight and Performance Management**

Every Childrens Services develops its Quality Assurance and Performance Framework which builds in processes that allows practitioners, managers, and senior leaders to track data and measure improvements in outcomes for children. Alongside this, Childrens Services also has a quality assurance approach which usually includes, case auditing, direct observations, tracking of recommendations and learning spaces to reflect and improve practice, based on findings. In Bury, both across early help and social care there is a programme of case audit, thematic audit, and moderation of audit. Audits are all awarded a grading based on Ofsted regulatory descriptions and all this information is reviewed monthly by the strategic leads.

The Peer Challenge team recognised that Bury was carrying out all 'expected' activity as well as moderating and tracking improvement. However, they challenged Bury on the need to further strengthen its approach to service improvement and performance management. The review encouraged better use of performance data to drive improvement and respond to the need to improve analysis and insight derived from data which the Council needs to provide through the corporate core. The team recognised that work is underway to develop the corporate core approach to provide necessary data, including the development of geographical profiles as well as the strength of the developing data information group which sits under the Children Strategic

Partnership Board but advised that this was not yet mature. The Team found there was a greater culture of compliance rather than quality.

Additionally, the team encouraged the council to ensure members are better informed and aware of social care performance. It welcomed the development of the new Children and Young Peoples Scrutiny Committee

## **2.10 Recruitment and Retention of Social Workers**

The Peer Team noted that Bury has many impressive people at middle and team manager level across all services. Their support is appreciated by social workers. Social workers told the team that they stay in Bury because they value the support from their managers and peers. In addition, they value the networks they can form working in a small authority. Whilst Bury can recruit newly qualified social workers often due to them completing final placements in Bury and wanting to stay, however as with other local Authorities locally and nationally, recruitment and retention of good social workers is challenging and those leaving the authority talked of high caseloads and the feeling that they cannot do their best job.

Whilst the new social work model, signs of safety provides the opportunity to develop strength-based approaches to practice, high caseloads can result in frustration for workers in trying to adopt new models of working whilst under pressure. The peer team challenged Bury to develop a more vigorous and proactive approach to recruitment which will require support from the corporate core. There is a competitive market across the Northwest and the challenge for Bury is to develop a recruitment strategy that leads to a compelling offer, supported by agile and effective recruitment processes

## **2.11 Capacity for Transformation and Infrastructure**

The peer team recognised the commitment from the Chief Executive and Director to improve Childrens Services and the role of partners in transformation. The challenge from the peer team was to give greater prominence to social care within the Let's Do It approach for children as well as a greater focus on educational attainment. The Peer team found little awareness across the services of the Let's Do It strategy and more specifically in how vulnerable children are supported through this approach. The challenge is to define the journey and the narrative for Childrens Services within the wider strategic intent with a suggestion made by the Peer Team to do this through the development of a system wide Transformation Board.

## **2.12 Recommendations from the Peer Challenge**

The Peer Challenge Team distilled the findings into short term and longer-term priorities for consideration

### **Early Priorities**

- Review All Child in Need and Early Help cases to identify risks and cases that can be closed – to be completed with some urgency
- Work across the partnership to review the Childrens Threshold Document to ensure common understanding

- Provide sufficient Business Support to enable managers and social care professionals to focus on core roles and statutory duties
- Work with colleagues in the corporate core to establish flexible approaches which will allow for more speed in progressing key processes
- Take a more proactive approach to recruitment and retention to strengthen Burys competitive advantage in the workplace
- Establish a Children's Transformation Board with an independent chair and an improvement plan to hold the system to account and track progress

### **Longer Term Priorities**

- Develop a communication programme for all staff and partners to enhance engagement at all levels and give clarity on the direction of travel
- Refine the narrative on approach, operating models and philosophy. This should be wider, strength-based model that incorporates and goes beyond the Signs of Safety model of practice
- Evaluate the effectiveness and impact of early help
- Continue to develop the approach to Quality Assurance moving from a focus on compliance to one of improved quality- working with staff to drive better outcomes and practice
- Enhance performance and information systems and provide additional analytical capacity to develop greater insight and understanding of service performance
- Consider how the independent scrutineer role for the Integrated Safeguarding Partnership is progressed
- Strengthen the corporate parenting board and provide additional opportunities and support to Councillors to challenge and be champions for children and young people such as through the new Scrutiny Committee
- Build on the work of the Children in Care Council to give children and young people more opportunity to be involved in design and co-production of service development
- Give additional attention to improving the quality, safety and quality of accommodation for care leavers

### **2.13 Response to the Peer Challenge**

The Chief Executive, Lead Member and Executive Director accepted the findings of the review, and the Childrens Senior Leadership Team has started work on early priorities to offer reassurance and to start to make the improvements needed to secure better outcomes for children

### **2.14 Transformation Board**

The transformation Board has been developed and had its first meeting on 16<sup>th</sup> September. An independent chair has been appointed and the first Board agreed the terms of reference and membership. A draft delivery plan has been developed and the Board will meet again on 21<sup>st</sup> October to review progress and sign off immediate actions.

### **2.15 Early Help and Child in Need -Case Reviews**

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of August all senior leads including an external improvement lead met to sample every child in need and early help case. In early help -all families open to the council locality team were sampled. This equated to 149 families. The audit team co-located to enable live discussion about cases where there were different views on how threshold for a service was being applied. The lead for practice improvement also reviewed cases across the cohort to provide an independent view on the application of threshold.

The same methodology was applied to children receiving support through child in need. This equated to a review of 141 families.

Some findings:

- There was **no** evidence of significant safeguarding concerns which required escalation into child protection services
- When early help is accessed via the locality teams through nurseries, schools or other professionals there was evidence of both appropriate support at the right level and evidence of positive impact on outcomes for children
- When early help is provided through step down from a referral into MASH or from a case already opened in social care – there was evidence that for some children they would be better supported through a social work assessment and child in need plan and were stepping down too quickly
- There was evidence that children subject to child in need plans can sometimes experience delay, as other higher risk cases are prioritised by workers
- There was some evidence that high caseloads impact on the quality of some practice
- Although there are some good examples of childrens voices being visible; this is not consistent and needs to be a priority.
- The quality of recording needs to improve with some case recording being described as brief and not always telling the story for children and families

2.16 In response to the findings the senior leadership team across early help and social care has driven change at pace:

- There has been a complete refresh of the MASH -the operating model, the workflow and the profiles of members
- Working with partners the MASH team has again safely co-located and where this has not been possible a more robust system is in place to ensure dynamic discussions and decision making across partners
- Early help managers are now co-locating in the MASH three times a week to support decision making especially in decisions about step-up and step-down
- The step-up and step-down protocol has been reviewed and refreshed to clarify the arrangements between early help and social care
- A sampling of all closed cases has been completed from between April to September 21, by senior leads and by the independent improvement lead to reassure that children have received the right help at the right level
- Weekly sampling of MASH contacts is now completed to maintain management oversight and grip of practice

- Weekly reflection time is now built into the MASH operation to support practitioners to align threshold and reflect on practice to drive improvement and better outcomes for children
- The Multi agency steering group for the MASH has been reset and will meet at the end of October to review the changes and agree refreshed terms of reference

## **2.17 Recruitment and Retention**

To deliver better services for children there is a requirement to reduce caseloads. To reduce caseloads initial investment is required to build capacity to allow good practice to flourish. A short-term solution is to introduce two project teams into the Safeguarding Service and the Initial Response Service to work with families to reduce their reliance and need for social work support and help them to receive the support from universal services through an early help approach. It is envisaged that the two teams will work for 6 months to stabilise the system. This will also allow the Initial Response Teams to align with the locality early help teams and work with family and communities to better understand how children's needs can be met within their own neighbourhood and reduce the demand on centralised services. This will reflect the journey Bury is on through its Let's Do It Strategy to build capacity in community and reduce demand. Moving more resource into locality will enable practitioners to build local networks, understand local need and respond more effectively to reduce family distress. It will also provide a context for relationships between statutory services and early help to work more collaboratively and avoid escalation to what is both high costs and intrusive social care services. Families and children are best cared for in their own families with the least intervention where this is safe to do so.

As we reduce the demand in the system and stabilise the workflow it will allow us to move to recruitment with a clearer narrative and more compelling proposition that the Let's Do It approach can provide. We have appointed and embedded the new team into the safeguarding service and the team to support IRT will start on 8<sup>th</sup> November. A focus on Recruitment and Retention is a key focus of the Delivery plan and board.

## **2.18 Quality Assurance**

The quality assurance framework has been refreshed and reflects an approach across all practitioners in children's services, early help, social care and education. The audit and reporting mechanisms have been reviewed with senior leads and we are reflecting on how we move from a compliance culture to a quality organisation where good practice, ideas and innovation can flourish.

Whilst we will continue to drive performance around key indicators, we have introduced greater autonomy alongside clear expectations on team managers and service managers to know their own services well, to build in greater thematic auditing around key practice 'hot spots' and learning cycles so that teams are involved in dynamic discussions every week about what is working and how they will resolve issues. We are at the start of this journey and will seek to test this out over the next quarter and launch across the Directorate from April 2022

## **2.19 Threshold Document**

The Bury Integrated Safeguarding Partnership is responsible for the determination of how thresholds for service provision apply. A small multi agency working group has already refreshed the document and this will be presented to the Strategic Safeguarding Partners in November with a view to developing an implementation plan across the partnership to support this simplified approach to assessment needs and to developing strength based and relational approaches to decision making for families, rooted in the concept of the Let's Do It approach for children

## **3.0 CONCLUSION**

The Peer Challenge has afforded the Council, its partners and children services the opportunity to reflect on the quality of its offer to children and families and there is an appetite and energy to reform and transform services to make the improvements needed. Whilst there are different and specific needs across Bury's children, the senior leadership team is working to ensure that priorities falling out of the review contribute to a coherent transformation plan. There is also a commitment to place children, young people and their families at the heart of shaping this development. The Peer Challenge is another element of our journey that has allowed us to test out our approach and to understand and celebrate our strengths but to challenge ourselves to do better

3.1 The start of the work on the early priorities is now underway with some tasks already completed. The focus will now move to the longer term actions outlined by the Peer Challenge:

- Developing the care leaver offer – Through the Corporate Parent Board we will review the offer and specifically focus on improving the accommodation available to young people
- Co-production- As we develop services, we will be seeking to involve families, children and young people to inform and produce with us. This will be supported through the new Co-production subgroup of the Children Strategic Partnership Board
- Embed the new Quality Assurance approach and seek further peer support in testing out our progress and impact on children's outcomes and ensure that our new Quality Assurance Approach drives the quality of practice.
- Review our workforce approach -working across the partnership to develop models of intervention together to provide an integrated response to need locally
- Develop our communication strategy so that the work and progress is celebrated and leads to a strengthened and better understood narrative or our vision and intention for children and young people in Bury
- Finally to build a stable high performing workforce that positively impacts on the outcomes for Bury's most vulnerable children

3.2 Committee members are asked to consider and comment on the information provided in this report

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**List of Background Papers: -**

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Executive Director sign off Date: \_\_\_\_\_

JET Meeting Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix**

**Childrens Data**