

SCRUTINY REPORT



MEETING: CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

DATE: THURSDAY 22 SEPTEMBER 2022

SUBJECT: IMPROVEMENT PLAN, DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION VISIT AND THE OFSTED MONITORING VISIT

REPORT FROM: CABINET MEMBER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

CONTACT OFFICER: JEANETTE RICHARDS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

1.0 BACKGROUND

- 1.1 This report provides an update on the progress of the Children's Services Improvement Plan that was put in place in response to the findings of the Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services that was carried out by Ofsted between 25 October 2021 to 5 November 2021 and judged services to be inadequate. The Inspection report was published on 17 December 2021.
- 1.2 To provide an update on the progress review of Bury Children's Services from the Department for Education that took place on 25 May and 26 May 2022.
- 1.3 To provide an update on the Ofsted Monitoring visit that took place on the 21 and 22 June 2022; this was the first visit since the local authority was judged to be inadequate in December 2021.

2.0 ISSUES

Children's Services Improvement Plan

- 2.1 The Improvement Plan is set out in seven priority areas:
 - Strengthening the effectiveness of multi-agency governance and partnership arrangement and support provided to children, young people, and their families.
 - Establishing a stable and effective leadership and management team.
 - Build a skilled, confident, and experienced workforce.
 - Improve Performance Management, QA, and Management Information Systems To develop and support good Social Work Practice.
 - Identify and effectively support children in need of Help and Protection.
 - Ensure purposeful and timely care planning that direct proportionate and effective interventions for children and their outcomes.Develop a strategic and co-ordinate approach to providing support for care leavers to improve their outcomes.
- 2.2 The progress of the Improvement Plan is overseen by a Children's Improvement Board that meets monthly and is chaired by an Independent Chair, Linda Clegg who is also our DfE Advisor. The Board has full and consistent representation from the Lead Member, Cabinet

Member for Children and Young People, Department for Education case lead, Members, Chief Executive, Executive Director of Children's Services, Children's Services Directors/Assistant Directors, Council departments and partners including Greater Manchester Police, Health and others involved in delivery of the improvement plan.

- 2.3 The last Board meeting held on the 23 August 2022 and a detailed update was given on the progress of the Improvement Plan, Children's Services and Partners were asked to report on the quality of practice and services to children and families, how we know what the quality of practice is like, plans to maintain and improve practice and any barriers to improvement. A full and detailed discussion took place, and a summary is set out below in sections 2.4 to 2.25.
- 2.4 There has been significant work undertaken to strengthen the effectiveness of multi-agency governance and partnership arrangements and support provided to children, young people, and their families. There has been a review of the Bury Integrated Safeguarding Partnership (BISP) led by Jane Shuttleworth aimed at strengthening multi-agency governance and partnership arrangements and there is now a clear structure in place. The next stage of this review which has started is to ensure the business unit that supports the BISP has the right resources, skills, and experience to drive forward the new arrangements.
- 2.5 The Principal Social Worker, will from September Chair a multi-agency Operational Implementation group aimed at bringing partners together to improve safeguarding practice
- 2.6 A new continuum of need has been developed which will assist practitioners and managers across the partnership to identify a child's level of need and/or risk and match that need to the right support, at the right time, by the right person and in the right place. Professionals can use the tool and guidance to support quality conversations about levels out of need and risk - and it can be used in professional reflective supervision and in multi-agency discussions to support decision making. The new continuum of need document will be launched in September 2022 at a partnership event.
- 2.7 The permanent Director of Social Care Practice, Sean Walsh will take up post on 6 September 2022. This means Bury Children's Services now have a permanent Senior Leadership Team. In addition, Board was advised James Mason has achieved an internal promotion and has taken up the post of Principal Social Worker having worked for Bury as a Service Manager for several years.
- 2.8 Our priority is to build a skilled, confident, and experienced workforce. We continue to face challenges recruiting permanent Social Workers, embedding good practice is impacted by recruitment challenges, with a high agency rate and a high agency turnover rate. We continue to have three project teams supporting the services pending recruitment of permanent staff. For some Social Workers caseloads are too high and beyond our aspirational caseload average of 15. High caseloads for some Social Workers are impacting on the quality of practice in all areas of the service. At the time of the Board meeting the highest Social Work caseload was 34.
- 2.9 Following discussions at the last Board meeting, the Interim Director of Children's Social Care Practice was asked to provide an update on re-referrals as our performance data highlighted that our re-referral rate was higher than the National Average (22.7%) and Statistical Neighbour rate (21.9%). Board was advised the re-referral rate had reduced to 30.1% in July from a high of 36.3%. A review of re-referrals carried out in July 2022 at the request of the Improvement Board highlighted that there are some internal processes that are inflating our re-referral rate and action is being taken to address this and to improve step-down practice to make sure other support is in place when children no longer need the support of a Social Worker.
- 2.10 There is improvement in the practice of the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) which will be explored more in the Ofsted Monitoring Visit section of this report. There is improved timeliness with 84% of contacts being screened within one working day and clearer decision

making in the MASH. The MASH and the Complex Safeguarding Teams are now co-located with the partners at the Police Station and this is supporting effective multi-agency working.

- 2.11 We are developing our performance and quality assurance approaches and a Strategy Assurance and Reform Officer who will take up post in October 2022 have been appointed to support this area of development. We have a suite of performance data that helps us to understand service performance and to take required actions. We need to develop data reports in such a way that they can be easily accessible and used at team and practitioner level. We have in place a quality assurance framework and a programme of audit activity which is supporting us to understand the quality of practice however more needs to be done to ensure good quality auditing is embedded and the application of practice standards are being consistently applied in audit. We have refreshed our practice standards, and these will be signed off in September.
- 2.12 The Principal Social Worker has now introduced the Bury Commitments, which set out those areas of practice that will have the greatest impact on practice and outcomes for children and families. The Bury Commitments set out an expectation that we will have a relentless focus on improving the quality of supervision to practitioners, improving the quality of assessments and the information we use to inform assessments. Our own audit findings demonstrate that we need to improve the quality of assessments and consider historical information, impact chronologies that help us to understand the impact of significant events in a child's life, the quality of plans and how we review them, direct work with children so we fully understand their daily lived experience and wishes and feelings and that this understanding is used to inform plans.
- 2.13 The Workforce Development team that reports to the Principal Social Worker is strengthening learning and development plans. A new programme of training that targets the Bury commitments and areas of practice that require development and improvement is now in place, training has included Strategy Discussions, S47 enquiries, assessment, planning including permanence planning.
- 2.14 We have now moved away from Signs of Safety and have agreement to progress with the Hertfordshire Family Safeguarding Model that has been described as a 'real strength' by Ofsted and was cited in 'The Independent Review of Children's Social Care - The Case for Change' as effective at preventing children from becoming looked after and reducing the numbers of children on child protection plans. The model aims to improve how these services work with families, and outcomes for children and their parents. DfE have approved 130 days through 2022/23 to support implementation of the Family Safeguarding model they have established a project board. There is an expected 10-month implementation period, workforce capacity is necessary to proceed.
- <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2022/07/31/impact-of-family-safeguarding-model-hailed-as-councils-improves-to-outstanding/>
- 2.15 We have now refreshed the recording forms that practitioners use; the new forms will help practitioners to be more focussed and supports good practice and recording. These forms will be further developed as we move forward with the family safeguarding model. Practitioners are reporting that they are finding the new forms more helpful and that they are better supporting their work.
- 2.16 We need to improve our arrangements when children transfer from one social care team to another. We need to ensure transfer is timely and that the quality of work transferring is of a good enough standard and up to date but more importantly we need to ensure the experience of children and families is improved and that any change is well communicated, and introductions take place routinely as part of handover from one practitioner to another.
- 2.17 We have strengthened our Public Law Outline procedures and standards from July 2022, and we are working to improve practice and embed new ways of working to ensure families are clear about our position, what needs to change and what support is available to them.

We are now better tracking the progress of pre-proceedings which will reduce the risk of drift and delay for children. Legal team have experienced staffing challenges which are being addressed; Senior Solicitors are now providing advice to legal gateway which is ensuring more consistent legal advice and there will be a representative who can attend face to face pre-proceedings meetings going forward. We have reset expectations in relation to the reports that should be available to legal gateway both in terms of quality and timeliness, this has been inconsistent and is being kept under review.

- 2.18 The quality of child protection planning is inconsistent and needs to improve. The Child Protection Conference Chair are being supported to provide more consistent scrutiny and challenge in relation to the progress of child protection planning. The Social Worker and partners need to work together more closely with the parents/carers and support the development and delivery of the child protection plan via Core Groups to ensure more timely work is undertaken to reduce risk. We have been provided with additional capacity to support improvement in this area and we have engaged an independent professional from another local authority to undertake a peer review which will support multi-agency practice development and improvement.
- 2.19 We are developing insight and understanding of permanence planning including early permanence planning and this forms part of the learning and development programme. We have put in place a Permanence Tracker that supports to ensure there are timely permanence decisions made for children that secure emotional and legal permanence for them. A new permanence panel chaired by the Director of Social Care Practice will be established in September, this panel will provide oversight of permanence planning and strengthen practice in this area.
- 2.20 Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) are a statutory role that is in place to ensure the local authority is meeting its statutory responsibilities to looked after children and that care planning for them is meeting their needs. IROs are working with us co-operatively to develop their role and impact and they are being supported to escalate concerns when they have concerns.
- 2.21 Placement stability for most children is good, with less than 10% of children having 3 or more placement moves in 12 months. Placement sufficiency is a challenge as we do not have access to the range of placements needed for children which can mean we have no option but to place children in external placement and out of area which is costly to the local authority. Placement sufficiency is a challenge for all local authorities, and we are taking the following actions to address this: we are developing our in-house fostering service and aim to increase the number and availability of foster carers as well as implementing a specialist fostering model as an alternative to Independent Fostering Agency Placements and residential care and we are engaged in work on a Greater Manchester basis to improve placement sufficiency. We have established a weekly placement panel, the initial work of the panel is to consider children in residential placements to ensure the right children are in residential care, their individual needs are being met and to ensure children who can be cared for in a family placement are supported to achieve that.
- 2.22 We have approval from Cabinet to establish an edge of care service and will be working with Essex as an improvement partner late autumn on this. The edge of care service will support children to remain in their own families when it is safe to do so and will support us to safely reduce the number of looked after children we have.
- 2.23 Virtual school has driven improved Personal Education Plan (PEP) completion during the last year and an improvement in the quality of the PEP has been observed. Lack of stability in the Social Workforce is having an impact on maintaining the quality of PEP's and difficulties finding placements for some of our young people with complex needs.
- 2.24 We have agreement as part of restructure proposals to create dedicated care leaver teams which will support us to be focussed on meeting their needs and providing them with the help and support that every good parent would provide via a published local offer. We need to improve the quality of Pathway Plans (the plan in place to support the young person's

transition to adulthood). It is positive that the service is in touch with 98% of Care Leavers aged 19 - 21 years, we are working with others to ensure Care Leavers have the range of education, employment and training opportunities post 18 years. We need to improve our placement sufficiency for Care Leavers by increasing the number of Staying Put arrangements (where young people can remain in their foster placement post 18 years, increasing access to semi-independent accommodation and supported lodgings. We are engaged in the Greater Manchester House Project and are working to secure 5 tenancies which will increase sufficiency.

- 2.25 There are delays in the young people who need support from adult social care and there is a review of transition pathways under review which will see more timely transitions.

Department for Education Review

- 2.26 The Department for Education (DfE) undertook a review of progress since the Ofsted Inspection of children's services on 25 and 26 May 2022; the review led by Linda Clegg in her capacity as DfE Improvement Adviser, Kelly Knott (Head of Northern Region) and Charlotte Harker (DfE Intervention Lead). During the review discussions took place with frontline practitioners, social workers, service managers, strategic leads, and representatives from partner agencies.

Key Findings

- 2.27 It was evident throughout the review that staff are dedicated, loyal and committed to working in Bury. Staff morale was reported as good across the service, though the challenges Bury faces in recruiting and retaining social workers presents a risk and this was clearly articulated by staff. It was recognised that the recruitment of a permanent workforce is fundamental to implementing sustainable improvements.
- 2.28 It was reported staff described leaders of children's services as visible and approachable and they felt well supported by managers, something they reflected had not always been the case. The appointment of Jeanette Richards, as the permanent Director of Children's Services, is a positive step in establishing a stable leadership team and this was welcomed by staff and partners.
- 2.29 The vision for children and young people in Bury, and the plan to deliver this, was not well understood by staff or partners, it was noted there had been recent communication. It was recommended that it would be beneficial to review your communication and engagement strategy,
- 2.30 The introduction of the new workforce strategy was viewed as a positive step, but we will need to monitor the impact of this closely. Leaders were asked to reflect on whether HR processes are hindering the timely recruitment of staff to all roles across Children's Services.
- 2.31 Partnership working in Bury was said to be underdeveloped. It is evident that the lack of a strategic partnership approach is hindering the work of frontline staff in supporting children and families. The refreshed focus, on the delivery and improvement of children's services, by the Police was viewed as positive and the understanding of Health statutory responsibilities was less evident during the review. The review being undertaken by Jane Shuttleworth into integrated safeguarding arrangements was viewed as key to developing a stronger partnership.
- 2.32 The DfE recognised that a threshold document was in existence, they also recognised that it was not being applied consistently and advised further work is needed to remedy this. Work has progressed to refresh the Continuum of Need, see section 2.6.
- 2.33 The DfE acknowledged that there is a lack of clarity about the model of social work practice being used. Children's Services are moving away from signs of Safety and now have Cabinet approval to implement the Hertfordshire Family Safeguarding Model, see 2.14.

- 2.34 Overall, the DfE were encouraged to hear the commitment, from corporate and political leaders, to improving children's services. However, it was stated that this needs to translate into tangible action and investment in sustainable improvement that drives longer term efficiencies. Furthermore, it was recommended that Political leaders should distinguish their role further in developing their effectiveness to provide support, scrutiny, and challenge, and not be drawn into operational decisions.

Ofsted Monitoring Visit

- 2.35 The Ofsted Monitoring visit carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework took place on 21 and 22 June 2022, this was the first visit since the local authority was judged to be inadequate in December 2021. The monitoring visit focussed on Step-up from, and step-down to, early help, contacts to the MASH, referrals, and re-referrals, strategy discussions and section 47 enquiries, child in need assessments, the management of allegations of abuse against professionals who work with children, the emergency management of concerns for children outside of normal office hours and the impact of leaders and managers.

- 2.36 A range of evidence was considered during the visit, including electronic records, performance management information, case file audits and other information provided by senior managers. In addition, inspectors spoke to a range of staff including social workers, managers, and the local authority designated officer.

Key findings

- 2.37 Ofsted noted a more stable leadership team, and the appointment of a permanent Director is having a positive impact on the workforce. Senior Managers are appropriately focusing on building the foundations to improve practice. However, this was not yet having an impact for children and weaknesses in safeguarding practice and partnership arrangements were observed.
- 2.38 Significant challenges in the recruitment of social workers were found to be impeding our ability to improve practice and services.
- 2.39 Additional capacity to the out of hours Emergency Duty Team service (EDT) and the Designated Officer was said to be leading to swift action being taken to protect children.
- 2.40 Ofsted recognised there are a wide range of services to support children and families in need of early help. When children are referred into the MASH, their needs are appropriately identified through effective screening and consistent application of appropriate thresholds. It was acknowledged that more needed to be done to ensure partners share information with the MASH in a timely way and to prevent needs from escalating, and a refreshed early help strategy is due to be launched imminently to support this.
- 2.41 Partners need to act promptly and refer into the MASH, or the emergency duty team when outside of normal office hours when there are concerns about children being at risk of likely or actual significant harm, to keep children safe.
- 2.42 Delays in strategy discussions taking place were referenced and a significant amount of work has been undertaken to improve the quality and timeliness of discussions. This has included mandatory training to staff, discussions with partners and briefings being shared with partners via the Improvement Board.
- 2.43 The quality of assessments and plans for children was found to still be an area for improvement and work is ongoing to improve the quality. Training is being offered to all staff that will highlight the importance of considering all information including history, considering each individual child's diverse needs and a full analysis of risk and need. This will enable Social Workers to gain a deeper understanding of children's needs to inform effective planning.

- 2.44 Social Workers reported positively on the support they receive through supervision, this was however found to be inconsistent, not reflective or helping Social Workers to consider concerns and share the risks. Actions were found to be too task focussed.
- 2.45 Ofsted acknowledged the quality assurance framework had been refreshed and establishing regular performance management meetings and routine audit activity. However, analysis of data needs to improve so it can be used to identify and understand emerging issues and what this means for children.
- 2.46 It was recognised that auditing has been strengthened however it was said that more needs to be done to further strengthen moderation and to ensure learning from audit is driving practice development and improvement. We have now introduced learning circles and new communications to support learning from audit and we have put in place tighter arrangements to monitor actions from audits are completed.

3.0 CONCLUSION

- 3.1 Progress of the Children's services Improvement Plan will continue to be monitored at the monthly Children's Improvement Board chaired by an Independent Chair, Linda Clegg.
- 3.2 The findings of the progress review of Bury Children's Services from the Department for Education that took place on 25 May 2022 and 26 May 2022 have been considered alongside the improvement plan. Linda Clegg, Department for Education Advisor is required to provide a six weekly report and a further six-monthly progress review will take place in November 2022.
- 3.3 Findings from the Ofsted Monitoring visit that took place on 21 and 22 June 2022 have been considered in the improvement plan. We are expecting a further Ofsted monitoring visit in October 2022. This visit will focus on child protection planning, children subject to Public Law Outline and the impact of managers and leaders.

List of Background Papers: -

Ofsted Inspection of Bury Local Authority Children's Services Inspection dates: 25 October 2021 to 5 November 2021. Report published on 17 December 2021.

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Executive Director sign off Date: _____

JET Meeting Date: _____