

Classification: Open	Decision Type: Non-Key
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Report to:	Cabinet	Date: 16 November 2022
Subject:	Ofsted Monitoring Visit	
Report of	Cabinet Member for Children and Young People	

Summary

1. The purpose of this report is to inform Council of the findings of the Ofsted Monitoring visit of Childrens Services during the 12th and 13th of October 2022.
2. This is the Second monitoring visit and the first to be published on the Ofsted website following Childrens Services receiving an overall judgement of inadequate on the 17th of December 2021.
3. The publication by Ofsted of the letter outlining the findings of the visit coincides with Cabinet taking place on the 16th November, therefore Democratic Services will circulate a copy of the letter to Cabinet Members at the earliest opportunity.

Recommendation(s)

4. That the findings of the monitoring visit be noted by Cabinet.
5. That Cabinet note the progress made.
6. That Cabinet note the breadth of assurance mechanisms in place to support/challenge and scrutinise the impact of improvement activity upon outcomes for children and families and therefore recommend to Council that the requirement for Chief Executive provide verbal monthly updates to cabinet is no longer required.

Reasons for recommendation(s)

7. The headline findings from Inspectors indicate that the strategic approach and improvement activity has delivered progress, though there is much more to do to consistently improve outcomes for children and families in Bury.
8. There is a comprehensive assurance system around Improvement activity both within Bury and via external Scrutiny from the DfE
9. Council agreed a motion on the 19th January 2022 requesting the Chief Executive provide a monthly update to Cabinet on the progress of the improvement plan. Cabinet is now asked to recommend to Council that this is no longer required due to the range of other reporting mechanisms in place as set out in the body of this report.

Alternative options considered and rejected

10. Consideration was given to whether to continue with monthly verbal update reports to Cabinet however following review of the mechanisms in place to track and share progress this was discounted.

Report Author and Contact Details:

Name: Jeanette Richards
Position: Executive Director of Children and Young People
Department: Children's Services
E-mail: j.richards@bury.gov.uk

11.0. Background

Bury Childrens Services received an inspection from Ofsted under the inspection of Local Authority Service (ILACS) framework from 25th October to 5th November 2021. The outcome of the inspection was published on the 17th December 2021. The findings of the inspection were an overall judgment of inadequate.

Arising from the inspection judgement, the secretary of State served an improvement notice upon the Council, working with its partner agencies to:

- (a) Produce an improvement plan to address the areas identified in the Ofsted report and any recommendations made by the advisor
- (b) Maintain an improvement board with an independent chair who will oversee the implementation of the plan
- (c) Aim for actions included in the plan to be delivered by the end of December 2022 or sooner if appropriate

The improvement notice will last a minimum of 12 months, with the expectation of a minimum of formal 6 monthly reviews take place. Since that time, a review was undertaken on the 25th and 26th May and a further review is scheduled with a provisional date of the 11th of January 2023.

Improvement Activity Assurance Mechanisms

An improvement plan was completed by the service within the timeframe imposed upon the Local Authority of the 31st of March 2021.

The plan was subsequently approved by the DfE and Ofsted.

In the role as DfE appointed advisor, Linda Clegg is required to report to the Department for Education around every 6 weeks, these reports are informed by the advisor observing practice, meeting teams and she has observed governance meetings including the Childrens Strategic Partnership Board, Corporate Parenting Board and Childrens Scrutiny Committee.

The advisor has also met with the lead member of Childrens services and the Chief Executive.

Fortnightly meetings between the DfE Advisor and the Executive Director of Childrens Services Jeanette Richards also take place.

Monthly meetings take place between Charlotte Harker Senior Case Lead, Vulnerable Childrens Unit, DfE and the Executive Director, Jeanette Richards.

The improvement board was established and is independently chaired by Linda Clegg acting as our DfE appointed advisor.

The Improvement Board has met monthly and is attended by the Leader of the Council, the Chief Executive, the Deputy Chief Executive, our strategic partners, the Council Executive, and there is cross-party political representation.

The Board has established terms of reference and is responsible for overseeing the progress of the improvement plan and subsequent impact upon outcomes for children and families in Bury.

External scrutiny of the activity of the board is provided via attendance from the DfE Senior Case lead, and minutes of the meeting are sent to Ofsted.

Our Voice of the Workforce Board, attended by staff across Childrens Services reports into the improvement board, this is the vehicle for sharing areas of strength and areas of concern felt by our staff.

There is significant additional oversight of the progress and impact of improvement activity and its impact upon children, via the Childrens Scrutiny Committee, the Corporate Parent Board, and the Childrens Strategic Partnership Board where it is a standard agenda item on each of the committees/Boards.

Alongside the monitoring and formal oversight of the DfE, on the 21st and 22nd of June this year Ofsted commenced a programme of quarterly monitoring, in line with the ILACs framework, the focus of these visits is upon areas of concern identified in the full inspection with the intention of bringing focus and scrutiny to improvement activity.

During the 12th and 13th of October Ofsted conducted a second monitoring visit.

The letter summarising the findings of the visit will be published on the Ofsted Website on the 16th of November 2022 and will be circulated to Cabinet Members on the date of publication ahead of the meeting of the Cabinet.

12.0 Issues for consideration by Cabinet

The Monitoring visit was conducted by His Majesty's Inspectors Lisa Walsh and Julie Knight, in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. A range of evidence was considered, both prior to and during the visit including reviewing children's electronic records, performance management information, reviewing case file audits and key strategic documents.

Whilst in Bury, inspectors met with social workers and managers, the Director of Social Work Practice, and the Executive Director of Childrens Services.

The focus of monitoring visits are issues identified as areas for improvement in the full inspection; this visit focused upon:

- Children receiving support via child in need processes.
- Children subject to a child protection plan.
- The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families.
- Quality Assurance - this includes a review of audits undertaken by Childrens services, to ascertain how well the local authority understands its quality of practice and the impact of practice upon outcomes for children and families.
- Children supported via Public Law Outline (PLO) pre-proceedings work. The PLO sets out the Local Authorities duties when we are considering making an application to the

court to seek a Care or Supervision Order. The circumstances that would warrant this action is where children are subject to child protection planning, where there are concerns in relation to the pace and capacity of parent's ability to change behaviours and circumstances that are causing harm to their child. The Local Authority is required to set out its concerns, including changes required of parents along with the details of the offer of support from agencies in writing via a "Letter Before Proceedings" and within a plan. Following this, meetings are scheduled with parents and their legal representatives, and progress is reviewed, culminating in decisions to either make an application to the court where there has been insufficient change in the child's lived experience or to cease PLO where progress has been made.

Findings from the visit

Ofsted recognised that there is continued corporate support including additional financial investment, which is supporting the proposed restructure, yet to be implemented following consultation. This will create stronger line of sight into the quality of practice, with additional front line team manager and social work posts being established, and enables the growth of the fostering service, along with new services that are strengths based and restorative; a family group conferencing service and an edge of care service and implementation of the evidence-based Family Safeguarding model.

Overall Ofsted indicated that since the last inspection there is evidence of pockets of progress in service delivery to children and families in Bury, which translated to a position where the service is beginning to improve the experiences for children subject to child in need and child protection planning.

Children were identified as being supported at the right threshold and no children were found to be at risk of immediate significant harm.

Leadership and Management

Ofsted noted the increased stability in the senior leadership team. We have now established a substantive senior leadership team, who have expressed a clear vision, standards, and expectations. This has been achieved via frequent communication, visibility, and presence in the office. Ofsted reported that these factors alongside the recruitment to the Director of Practice has brought a renewed positivity to the workforce, with staff reporting that senior managers are visible and have recently taken a more restorative approach to their engagement including better consultation with social workers to support in service improvements and reported that social workers and managers report that leaders now have a real focus on improving services for children.

During the visit social workers reported that senior managers are visible and have recently taken a more restorative approach to their engagement including better consultation with social workers to support service improvements.

It was acknowledged that since the last monitoring visit senior leaders have continued to focus on establishing the foundations for improving practice and children's experiences. During the visit social workers reported that leaders have a real focus upon improving services for children.

Ofsted were reassured that senior leaders accept and understand that there is much more to do to consistently make a difference to children's experiences and subsequently their outcomes.

It was identified that management oversight and challenge needs strengthening to drive quality improvements in practice.

There continues to be a high reliance upon agency team managers. Leaders are aware that regular and effective supervision is necessary to drive progress of children's plans, and therefore a new model of supervision has recently been launched, but there is more to do to embed this. Inspectors noted that the quality and frequency of supervision continues to be variable across the Initial Response and Safeguarding teams, there is more to do to ensure that it provides rigour and challenge where practice is poorer and in circumstances where children's lives are not improving, Ofsted saw that actions to progress cases are not always being completed and are too generic and lack timescales for completion. Often contingent planning was not evident. This is particularly critical for those children where there are concerns around parent's capacity to change in line with children's timescales where drift was identified in planning.

In the safeguarding teams some social workers caseloads are too high impacting on their ability to keep children's records up to date and this means that key decisions for children not always being fully evidenced on their records and subsequent opportunities for team managers to review children's progress is therefore reduced.

Ofsted stated that managers do not consistently provide appropriate challenge where children's plans are delayed. Management oversight and supervision will continue to be a priority of the Principal Social Worker ongoing learning opportunities will be provided and monthly audit of supervision will continue to take place.

Performance management and quality assurance activity

Ofsted noted the changes made to the quality assurance framework since the last monitoring visit, a renewed focus upon developing a performance management culture was noted, this has been achieved via developing data reporting, and performance management meetings, whilst progress has been made the Executive Director agreed that there is more to do to ensure that this system is consistently driving the improvements in practice necessary to improve outcomes for children.

A notable improvement since the last monitoring visit is that Ofsted's view of audit judgments aligned with the department's own judgements and reported that auditors and moderators are mostly consistent in understanding what good practice looks like. This is important and demonstrates that the department understands the performance well.

However, the link from audit findings to specific actions in relation to progress for individual children requires strengthening. Audits are balanced in identifying positive practice and areas for development. However, despite the audit tool requiring feedback from families, this continues not to be consistently audited to ensure compliance, there is more to do to strengthen our values around relational practice and working with families and results in a weaker overall understanding of children's experiences to direct improvement in the offer of support to them.

Workforce

It is clear that workforce issues remain a barrier to improvement with high caseloads of up to 25 being noted as well as a high reliance of agency staff, this adversely impacts on practice with some children continuing to experience too many changes of social worker contributing to significant drift and delay in progressing their plans, examples were cited of this churn impacting upon their willingness to engage with social workers in direct work.

More positively, there were examples seen by Inspectors of children experiencing a consistent social worker, with regular visiting which has resulted in positive and more meaningful relationships.

Assessment and planning

In relation to assessments, some improvements were noted and included evidence of an improving use of multi-agency information to understand risks and inform decision making in assessments for some children, this included assessments for disabled children. Family history is being used more readily to understand children's current experiences.

Stronger multi- agency information is included and is helping to inform risk analysis and planning for children.

Ofsted identified the appropriate application of threshold for intervention, noting that the rationale was clear when decisions are being made to step-up and step-down between early help, children in need and child protection.

Most children have an up-to-date plan. However, they are variable in quality with some being too generic and without timescales and they do not always provide families with information about what needs to change and by when. This means that children's individual needs are not consistently met in a timely way. Where plans are better quality, direct work is completed by social workers which helps to understand children's experiences which informs future planning.

For most children when their circumstances change and risks increase, there is appropriate and timely escalation from children in need to child protection processes.

Inspectors could see that there is regular attendance by key professionals at core group meetings and child protections conferences, and this is supporting sound decision making, these meetings are not always effective forums for holding partners to account for noncompletion of actions to reduce risk or meet children's needs. This learning will be addressed via a community of practice approach via the partnership operational group that is chaired by our Principal Social Worker and will include multi agency audits.

Where circumstances have not improved for children, inspectors did acknowledge stronger decision making and some recent positive examples of case escalation to address drift and delay which is translating to progression of plans for children subject to child protection plans and those who have recently entered pre-proceedings.

Public Law Outline Pre-Proceedings

In relation to practice within Public Law Outline (PLO) Pre-Proceedings Inspectors noted that since the inspection that there has been a significant focus upon strengthening the systems and practice in this area, practice standards have been

developed, and stronger partnership collaborating with the local authority's legal services.

This has resulted in Inspectors identifying senior management oversight of children who have been open longer to the service are now actively reviewed through regular legal gateway meetings, with Local Authority Solicitors in attendance.

The introduction of a PLO plan for families, which supports their understanding of the issues was noted as positive.

Data tracking PLO activity was shared with Inspectors who could see that since that the number of escalated into pre-proceedings has doubled since the last inspection which means that when children's lives are not improving, more children benefit from earlier decision making and appropriate escalation.

Inspectors also noted that when children's circumstances improve within PLO Pre Proceedings, they are appropriately supported to remain safely at home, having stepped down from pre-proceedings.

Links with the Corporate Priorities:

The improvement activity is informed by the following desired outcomes of the Let's Do It Strategy.

A Better Future for the Children of the Borough

A chance to feel more part of the Borough

A better Quality of Life

Equality Impact and Considerations:

N/A

Environmental Impact and Considerations:

N/A

Assessment and Mitigation of Risk:

N/A

Legal Implications:

This report updates Members on the recent inspection from Ofsted, the report will be publicly available from 16th November. Legal support will continue to be provided to the Children and Young People Directorate to support the improvement journey.

Financial Implications:

There are no direct financial consequences of the OFSTED monitoring visit. However, the Council has invested significant resources into temporary support to the department in the form of managed teams and additional interim staffing last financial year and this financial year and permanent recurrent investment into the restructure of children's services to strengthen the workforce and practices following the original OFSTED visit in December

Appendices:

None

Background papers:

None

Please include a glossary of terms, abbreviations and acronyms used in this report.

Term	Meaning