

9 May 2023

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Dear Jeanette

Monitoring visit to Bury children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Bury children's services on 28 February and 1 March 2023. This was the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in November 2021. His Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Lisa Walsh and Teresa Godfrey.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in achieving early permanence for children, in particular in relation to:

- Pre-proceedings.
- Recent entries into care.
- Children with plans for adoption, special guardianship or long-term fostering.

Inspectors also looked at the impact of leaders on this area of social work practice.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. A range of evidence was considered, including electronic records, performance management information, case file audits and other information provided by senior managers. In addition, inspectors spoke to social workers and managers.

Headline findings

Since the last inspection in 2021, steady progress has been made. Senior leaders have continued to develop the quality of social work practice and strengthen management oversight, to support timelier permanence for children. There is a renewed focus on securing earlier permanence for children, including through the introduction of a new strategy and framework for practice and the implementation of

a new permanence policy. This is leading to clearer expectations about permanence across the workforce and with partners, and supporting a more structured approach.

Senior leaders understand the impact of their improvement work to date. This is due to focused external scrutiny, such as peer reviews, and through more effective monitoring by the improvement board. There continues to be a strong focus on developing the workforce, by providing a range of appropriate training opportunities, including in motivational interviewing and permanence. Social workers have a clearer understanding of expectations and are embracing the new ways of working.

Despite these improvements, social work practice remains inconsistent, and some children still wait too long to achieve security through permanence. The local authority recognises that there is more to do to reduce drift and delay. Some initiatives have only recently been introduced and are not fully embedded and making a difference to all children. There is not sufficient stability in the workforce to support consistency of practice.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Senior leaders have a continued focus on the improvements needed and a clear vision to support permanence for children at the earliest opportunity. The local authority is on track with its improvement plan, which focuses on getting the basics right and seeks to deliver sustainable and improved outcomes for children.

Leaders are strengthening their oversight of early permanence for children in pre-proceedings through the introduction of more effective legal gateway panels. These are leading to timely escalation from child protection plans into pre-proceedings when circumstances for children do not change. When concerns escalate, social workers are recognising more routinely the importance of contingency planning, to support early permanence. This includes the completion of viability assessments to support children to remain in the care of their wider family when it is appropriate for them to do so. Plans made in pre-proceedings are being reviewed more effectively by senior managers to ensure that actions are completed within agreed timescales.

A recent strengthening of processes has enabled social workers and managers to have a greater focus on permanence when children come into care. For some children, different permanence options are fully considered, however, practice remains inconsistent, with others continuing to experience drift and delay.

Children's assessments are not routinely updated in preparation for looked-after reviews, or if children's circumstances change significantly in between meetings. This means that key decisions regarding permanence are often being made without the benefit of clear analysis and consideration of how past experiences inform current needs and risks.

Care plans vary in quality, with some lacking the necessary specific focus on children's long-term plans. A lack of contingency planning is contributing to drift and delay for some children, as progress is not consistently monitored or challenged

when circumstances do not change quickly enough for children. For these children, options to secure permanence are not sufficiently specific or timebound.

Some children are experiencing care from numerous different caregivers, which impacts on their ability to form trusting relationships with adults. A lack of sufficient placements to meet children's needs is leading to some children being placed in unsuitable placements, including, for example, with foster carers who only provide short-term placements. This is leading to placement instability for some children. Children's assessments for matching to new placements and decisions to move children are not consistently recorded. For these children, it is not clear whether sufficient consideration has been given to permanence in these arrangements. If accessing their files later in life, care-experienced adults would not be able to understand why social workers and managers had made these decisions.

Social workers know their children well and develop good relationships with them. The language used by social workers during home visits is child-centred and there is an emphasis on ensuring that children understand their circumstances. Social workers act on children's wishes and ensure that they contribute to important decisions about their lives.

Children's progress in respect of permanence is not consistently considered at their second looked-after review. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) are not consistently confirming permanence at this point of the child's journey, contributing to drift and delay for some children, including those who are cared for at home by their parents. Children's reviews are held regularly and IROs maintain oversight through mid-review monitoring of compliance and practice issues. Children are encouraged to attend their reviews and most meet with their IRO before their review, supporting them to contribute to the process and have a clear understanding of their plan.

A number of children are being supported to live with their brothers and sisters in permanently matched long-term foster placements. These children are experiencing consistent care from committed carers and receiving the quality of support they would from a good parent.

Social workers continue to consider special guardianship as a permanence option for children. This is supporting children to remain in their wider family and develop their sense of belonging. However, there is not a consistent approach by social workers to convey the benefits to carers of special guardianship. This reduces opportunities for permanence for some children.

When a placement order has been granted for a child with a plan for adoption, family-finding starts at the earliest opportunity. The local authority has celebrated successes in securing suitable adopters for a number of older children, and brothers and sisters together. Adoption introductions are well considered, with care taken to understand the impact on children. A range of life-story work is undertaken with children with adoption plans, and this is helping them to understand their life history

and time in care. The local authority has sustained practice in this area since the last inspection.

Leaders are prioritising workforce stability. There is now a permanent senior leadership team in place and permanent team leaders across children's services. This increased stability is supporting more consistent management oversight. However, there continues to be instability in the social work workforce, and this makes it more challenging to embed new ways of working and support consistency in practice for children. A successful recruitment drive has recently secured 23 social workers from overseas, who are due to start in April 2023.

Management oversight of children's cases in supervision does not always focus sufficiently on permanence. This is a missed opportunity to reduce drift and delay for some children.

The quality assurance framework now has a sharper focus on learning and ensuring that actions are implemented. A bi-monthly assurance meeting, along with a 'closing the loop' meeting, is strengthening accountability and contributing to a better understanding by senior leaders of the quality of practice. A transformation and improvement manager has recently been appointed to enhance the quality assurance framework.

Social workers spoke positively about the supportive team environment and the accessibility of managers in Bury. Leaders are appropriately focused on developing staff through a range of training opportunities that enhance their skills, such as in life-story work, court skills and early permanence. This is supporting social workers to develop the skills and knowledge to enable a more effective approach to planning for children. Purposeful weekly practice workshops, which are highly valued by staff, are held on a range of practice issues. A recent permanence event led by children enabled them to explain their journeys and how delays in permanence impacted on them. This event was attended by partners and the social care workforce and supported the launch of the new operational framework.

The local authority is ambitious to ensure that children's voices are central to all decision-making and service delivery in respect of permanence. Following a recent peer review and a corporate parenting workshop, children challenged effectively and changed the terms of reference, making corporate parenting board and the language it uses more accessible for all children.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Lisa Walsh
His Majesty's Inspector