

5 September 2023

Jeanette Richards  
Executive Director of Children's Services  
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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 1 and 2 August 2023. This was the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in November 2021. His Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Lisa Walsh and Rebekah Tucker.

#### **Areas covered by the visit**

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in relation to child exploitation, in particular:

- Children at risk of sexual or criminal exploitation.
- Children who are missing from home or care.
- Children at risk of radicalisation.

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, the local authority has continued to make steady progress on its improvement journey. Senior leaders have strengthened arrangements for children who are at risk from exploitation, which have become more strategically aligned to the regional model of practice. Governance arrangements have been enhanced as the complex safeguarding sub-group now reports directly to the safeguarding executive and board, providing greater accountability. The co-location of the multi-agency complex safeguarding team in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), alongside key partners at the police station, has enhanced the holistic offer to children and families. The risks and needs of children are identified early by

an effective multidisciplinary team and this collaborative partnership approach supports the reduction of risks for many children.

There are effective strategic and operational relationships in Bury, which underpin the work to identify and protect vulnerable children. Children benefit from well-trained and effective practitioners, who offer support to children and their families based on strong professional relationships and strength-based practice. There is also a strong commitment to developing contextual safety within different communities. For example, links have recently been made by dedicated workers with local faith leaders, to strengthen community awareness regarding indicators of potential child exploitation.

Despite these improvements, social work practice remains variable. The areas that require improvement include the timeliness of strategy meetings, the quality of assessments, plans and supervision, and the response to children who go missing.

### **Findings and evaluation of progress**

Senior leaders have a clear understanding of what needs to improve to ensure children are receiving a consistently good service. The improvement plan has a consistent focus on delivering improved outcomes for children. Political commitment and financial investment continue to support the strengthening of services for children in Bury. Leaders have welcomed external review, including the appointment of an independent scrutineer to oversee governance arrangements and the quality of practice for this part of the service. This has led to an increased focus on improving the quality of assessments and interventions, and a greater emphasis on understanding children's experiences when they are exploited. However, it is acknowledged by senior leaders that these arrangements are new and require time to embed to consistently make a difference for children.

Exploitation of vulnerable children is clearly recognised at the front door. Initial concerns are triaged effectively through the MASH. Referrals are prioritised in a timely way and there is a proportionate response to identified concerns. For most children, thresholds are appropriately applied, ensuring they receive the right intervention at the right time.

Children benefit from the expertise of specialist support through the well-resourced complex safeguarding team (CST), which includes police officers, social workers, a psychologist and a parenting officer. The allocated social worker and the CST social worker collaborate effectively using a strength-based approach to support children and their families. Inspectors saw many examples where this led to the reduction of risk. However, for some children, it is difficult to measure the impact and quality of the CST involvement, especially where historical familial risk is known and where there has been previous CST intervention.

Strategy meetings are mostly timely and well attended by key partners. Information is shared appropriately, and safety plans are developed for children who have been exposed to significant risks. Decision-making is mostly effective, although it is not always clear why concerns have not progressed to child protection enquiries, as a clearly recorded rationale from the manager is sometimes lacking. A small number of strategy meetings are delayed due to police availability. This means that the planning of early intervention for some children is not always informed by a timely multi-agency assessment of risk.

Daily governance meetings are linked with the MASH to discuss children at risk of exploitation or missing from home. This newly formed multi-agency forum offers the opportunity to support the sharing of intelligence, information and risk for children which have arisen in the previous 24 hours or over the weekend. This early multi-agency oversight supports mapping and community-based disruption work, although children's records are not consistently updated to reflect the discussions held at the meeting. This means that, for some children, there is a missed opportunity for this information to be used to inform subsequent decision-making.

Most children benefit from the collaborative relationships established between the allocated social worker and the CST worker. Interventions are well coordinated to support the reduction of risk. Risk assessments completed by the CST, known as the working to increase safety in exploitation (WISE) assessment, identify the exploitation risks for children effectively. The WISE assessment is completed alongside the allocated social worker's assessment. When both assessments are combined, they provide a holistic view of children's experiences. However, this is not yet consistent practice, which means that there are sometimes missed opportunities to understand the impact of risk for children.

The impact and quality of children's plans are variable. Stronger plans have clear actions and timescales and are co-produced with children and families. Workers develop positive relationships with children, focusing on building children's resilience to the risks of exploitation and the trauma they may have experienced in their lives. CST workers use the knowledge of the team psychologist appropriately to assist them in understanding how to best engage and support children and families. However, for some children, CST intervention is not always timely, which means that some children are not seen as regularly as they should be, and their plans are not as effective.

Most plans are regularly reviewed with children and their families, and by relevant professionals and key adults, to understand children's progress. In some circumstances where children are at high risk of exploitation, independent reviewing officers provide additional oversight to support subsequent planning.

Social workers build strong relationships with children and families, which helps them to understand their experiences. Frequent social work visiting, and creative pieces of direct work, capture the voice of the children effectively, contributing to improved

outcomes for children. The input from the CST parenting worker skilfully supports parents to understand risk and help safeguard their children. For many children, this collaborative approach has contributed to the reduction of risks.

As identified at the inspection in 2021, children who go missing do not receive a consistently effective response. Despite the recent realignment of services for children who go missing, this new model is not fully embedded and is not yet making a difference for all children. When children go missing from home, they are not consistently offered return home interviews at the earliest opportunity to ensure that risks are fully understood. However, some children benefit from detailed risk assessments, which support preventative action and inform up-to-date safety planning.

Senior leaders continue to prioritise workforce retention and recruitment. The mostly permanent leadership team continues to provide stability and consistency and they know themselves well. Most team managers are now permanent and more social workers are being recruited to fill vacant posts. However, the overall stability of the workforce remains fragile. Although there has been a reduction in the use of managed teams from three to one, there remains a high dependency on the use of agency staff.

The quality assurance and performance management frameworks are firmly embedded and making a difference to outcomes for most children. The newly established dashboards provide an additional line of sight for senior leaders on performance in practice. The quality of practice is reviewed effectively through a variety of audit mechanisms, with thematic learning shared at a monthly 'closing the loop' meeting on those areas of practice which require improvement. Senior leaders recognise that audit activity could be further strengthened by commissioning more independent auditors. Management oversight of children's cases in supervision does not consistently focus on the progression of plans.

Social workers report a positive culture in Bury. Senior leaders acknowledge that social workers' caseloads are too high. However, social workers say they feel well supported through supervision. They have access to a comprehensive suite of training to enhance their skills and to meet their learning needs. They feel that the 'Teaching Tuesdays' are a real help in assisting them to understand the direction of travel that the service is working towards. Children are supported by a committed workforce who take the time to get to know them well.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Lisa Walsh  
**His Majesty's Inspector**