

SCRUTINY REPORT

MEETING: Children's Scrutiny Committee

SUBJECT: Children's Services Improvement Plan Update

REPORT FROM: Jeanette Richards, Executive Director Children & Young People

CONTACT OFFICER: Beth Speak

1.0 BACKGROUND

1.1 This report provides an overview on the progress made to date on the Children's Improvement Plan, highlighting areas of progress in the last 6 months, providing an overview of current challenges and our areas of focus for the next 3-6 months. The report is organised into two parts – the first focusing on the enablers of good practice; and the second considering practice improvement in key areas within Children's Services.

2.0 ISSUES

ENABLERS FOR GOOD PRACTICE

2.1 Quality Assurance and Performance

Monthly auditing and dip sampling enables managers to understand auditing as one part of a wider framework around quality assurance. Heads of Service moderate audits and discussion within the service develops a shared view of what good practice looks like. Learning from audit is fed back to staff through our 'Teaching Tuesday' sessions, which continue to be well attended and open to the whole workforce. We are also producing 7-minute briefings every month on topics or areas of practices to share with staff.

The core Quality Assurance framework has been embedded, and we are widening its coverage – ensuring that other services and teams are part of a single, consistent approach – while also beginning to use other types of quality assurance, for example using practice weeks to provide senior managers with regular opportunities to observe practice. Our first Practice Week took place in March 2024.

Discussions about performance, quality assurance and improvement planning are a core part of weekly Children's Social Care Senior Management Team meetings (SMT) chaired by the Practice Director, with SMT Meetings alternating fortnightly between performance and QA one week and general business the next. From May 2024, Team Managers have shared a weekly performance report with their Head of Service to develop a more consistent approach to performance across teams. The report focuses on performance in relation to children seen, statutory visits, assessment timeliness and supervision. Reports also inform discussion in the fortnightly Performance & QA SMT meetings.

2.2 Systems & Support for Workers

In January 2024 we employed an external expert consultant to complete a diagnostic of our Children's Social Care & Early Help management information system and to

recommend and design improvements. Following this initial review, we have sequentially implemented changes starting with reconfiguring the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) systems with a refreshed Multi-Agency Referral Form (MARF) that closely aligns with the Continuum of Need, and a new safety plan – both went live in May. Next steps are to look at the pathway plan, co-producing a form with our young people.

We have also developed a Sharepoint site as a single point of access for all staff to tools, practice guidance and other key documents to support good practice. The site includes refreshed practice standards, guidance, standard templates, useful links to key sites to support practice development such as Research in Practice, training calendars, weekly performance reports and quality assurance briefings. It also includes a new Social Work Career Pathway and Induction by Role matrix developed by the interim PSW, which sets out the support available for new practitioners.

2.3 Leadership

In January 2024, a senior management restructure was proposed following the departure of the Assistant Director for Early Help, with better alignment of services in sympathy with DfE strategy - bringing Early Help services under the remit of the Practice Director for Social Care (supporting the model of family help) and Early Years services under the oversight of the Director for Education. The remodel also strengthened senior management capacity by introducing Service Managers in the three main social care operational areas (MASH/IRT, Family Safeguarding & Corporate Parenting). Responsibilities around assurance, including the Principal Social Worker role, have been combined with those for Learning & Development into a single portfolio under a Head of Service. This restructure was in place from late June.

Our permanent Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help started in post in May, having been in Bury as an interim Head of Service since the beginning of the year and having previously acted in an interim AD role in 2022.

2.4 Workforce

Over the past 18 months, we sought to address social work workforce issues through international recruitment, but this has been much slower than expected, leading to continued dependence on agency workers, especially in frontline teams, where the proportion remains at 40%. We have 12 international social workers in post and 3 more expected in June/July. Delays in Social Work England (SWE) registrations and English language requirements (IELTS) have impacted significantly on our timescales. While the remaining 6 social workers originally recruited remain committed to Bury, we are in discussions with the provider to end the project early and move forward with the 15 practitioners who have or will have joined us by July 2024. We have appointed a new recruitment partner to support a further drive for new workers on a payment by results basis.

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF PRACTICE

2.5 Front Door

In March 2024, a review of the phase 2 MASH implementation highlighted issues in relation to staffing, capacity and systems that affected the flow of work and decision making. A Rapid Improvement Plan was developed to address the issues and progress is being made – the system changes referred to in 2.2 above in particular support more effective decision making and vacancies within the team have been addressed and remedied.

In addition, the Practice Director established a MASH Strategic Group and Operational Group to provide clear governance:

- Operational Group – which meets fortnightly, chaired by the Head of Service
- Strategic Group – chaired by the Practice Director, currently meeting 4-6 weekly, moving to quarterly in future.

At the end of 2023, following concerns raised in relation to health capacity and its impact on timely decision making within the MASH/EHASH, NHS GM identified additional capacity, providing an additional 2-days of resource. However, there remains intermittent health presence in MASH while the health practitioner moves from a working from home arrangement. Cover during leave has also been an issue – although the Safeguarding Duty Nurse is available for urgent response (when 2-hour response needed).

2.6 Early Help Offer

Our DfE adviser is undertaking a review of our Early Help offer, the quality of practice and the impact of support provided for children and families. We received feedback in the DfE Review in April from partners that highlighted a need to strengthen the Early Help offer and process. There was a consensus view from partners that Early Help is only accessible as a step down from statutory services, with limited capacity available for referring other families for support from the council's Early Help services.

2.7 Family Safeguarding

The Family Safeguarding model formally launched in October 2024. We now have 5 family safeguarding teams with multi-agency practitioners in place (although not the full complement, as Adult Mental Health practitioners remain an unfilled gap). We have secured continued funding from the DfE to enable Hertfordshire County Council to continue their support in 2024-25, with a diagnostic overview planned for later in the year. Hertfordshire will also be providing support to the teams to reinforce the values and principles of Family Safeguarding. Our DfE Review in April identified that partners understood we were now a Family Safeguarding authority but were not aware of wider impact from the change in the social work approach to working with children and families. Practitioners working outside of the Family Safeguarding teams provided similar feedback, so there is a need to revisit the communications plan which has been affected by available capacity in the council's communications team.

2.8 Adolescent/Edge of Care Offer

There have been substantial delays in creating the team because of difficulties in recruiting into the social work roles within the initial team structure. These difficulties led to a re-think of the approach. Our Service Manager for Family Resources has revised the Edge of Care offer based on a youth worker approach. Progress in confirming job descriptions, job evaluations and structures was delayed by the senior management re-structure, which took precedence, but the new structure is expected to be formally agreed and out for recruitment shortly.

2.9 Fostering

We launched our first Mockingbird constellation in March 2024 (a Mockingbird constellation is a network of foster carers, working together and supporting each other, supported by an experienced foster carer). We are aiming for a second constellation to be live by the end of the year. There has been a 7% increase in foster carer payments on top of 12% last year ensuring that we remain competitive in the foster care market within GM and Lancashire. We have approved fourteen new families this year and lost five, which is positive compared to the pattern across the wider region. Fostering Unfiltered has been operational for 12 months across Greater Manchester. Our Head of Service is meeting with others from GM to review its effectiveness and sits on the steering groups driving the project forwards.

2.10 Support for Care Experienced Young Adults

Following an external review in May 2023, the Corporate Parenting Plan was reviewed and appropriately focused on the areas of development. The absence of the Head of Service between August and October 2023 impeded progress in challenging behaviours and practices within the service, resulting in the deficits in performance and outcomes identified in Ofsted's monitoring visit in November 2023.

In addition, while Corporate Parenting is a key priority for the Chief Executive and the Corporate Parenting Board now has regular oversight of the Corporate Parenting Plan. Key challenges within the plan remain around housing and employment opportunities for care experienced young people. Although the proportion of care leavers in suitable accommodation is consistently above the England and similar authority average there is a shortage of housing in Bury and options are not as good as we would wish for our care leavers – a situation worsened by the general pressure on social housing and private sector housing within Bury. External expert consultants are helping to develop a Housing Strategy and an interim offer that better meets the needs of our care experienced young people. Two key issues that need resolving are the effective planning across the council to support transition into homes as an adult and the development of a wider range of housing options to better support the range of needs of our young people, particularly with supported accommodation.

3.0 CONCLUSION

The last 12 months has seen many of the building blocks put in place for better practice and better outcomes for children and families – the launch of Family Safeguarding, the Mockingbird model for foster carers, the review of the MASH, the overhaul and revision of the management information system and tighter oversight of performance and support and guidance for practice. Leadership challenges have impeded the pace of improvement, although the return of a former interim Assistant Director into the permanent Director of Practice role, has supported positive changes in induction, refreshed practice standards and a renewed focus on performance and QA.

The greatest impediment to improvement has been difficulty in recruiting permanent staff. Following the necessary restructure and increase in the social work establishment in the autumn of 2022, Bury has struggled to fill those roles with permanent staff and has been chronically dependent on agency staff, which in turn has led to churn and turnover. Turnover significantly compromises the development of strong, consistent relationships with children and families that support positive change.

Addressing the recruitment and retention of permanent staff must be our number one task through the remainder of the year. New, permanent team managers in parts of the service are having a notable impact, but the overall quality of social work practice remains too variable across the service. The next 6 months will see a relentless focus on delivery of the basics of social work practice and a strengthened emphasis on Team Managers as the gatekeepers and guarantors of the quality and timeliness of work undertaken with children and families.

List of Background Papers:-

Contact Details:-

[Report Author]

Executive Director sign off Date: _____

JET Meeting Date: _____