

# SCRUTINY REPORT

<b>MEETING:</b>	<b>Children &amp; Young People Scrutiny Committee</b>
<b>DATE:</b>	<b>January 25<sup>th</sup> 2025</b>
<b>SUBJECT:</b>	<b>The experience and progress of children in care</b>
<b>REPORT FROM:</b>	<b>Cllr Lucy Smith, Lead Member for Children's Services</b>
<b>CONTACT OFFICER:</b>	<b>Linda Evans, Director of Practice Children's Social Care &amp; Early Help</b>

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## **1.0 BACKGROUND**

- 1.1 The experience and progress of children in care is one of the four main areas for judgement in an Ofsted standard inspection of local authority children's services (the experiences and progress of children who need help and protection; the experiences and progress of care leavers; and the impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families being the other three areas). Each of these individual areas of judgement inform the overall judgement on the effectiveness of the local authority.
- 1.2 The body of the report that follows contains an edited extract from the self-evaluation used to support the regional sector-led improvement process, whereby Director's of Children's Services and Heads of Service review the position of individual local authorities and offer each other challenge and support, while seeking to build understanding of where strengths lie across the region.
- 1.3 The annual regional sector-led improvement activity and self evaluation flows through in part into the Annual Conversation of each DCS (and their leadership teams) with the Ofsted regional director and their inspection framework leads.
- 1.4 The self-evaluation is thematically structured under headings relevant to the support provided for children in care and their long term home, but also focusing on the decision-making and oversight underpinning entry into care and a child's journey through family court proceedings.

## **2.0 ISSUES**

### **Entry into Care and Care Proceedings**

The Pre-Proceedings Protocol was reviewed in March 2024 and a case progression officer appointed to track and oversee the timeliness of care proceedings and pre-proceedings; in January we will be implementing a new arrangement for improved tracking of the progress of plans and procedures via a Public Law Outline Impact Board. We need to strengthen our overall tracking particularly in relation to order directions and we have put an interim tracker in place pending the PLO Impact Board being fully embedded.

A weekly Legal Gateway Panel is well established and is chaired by the Director of Social Care and Early Help (Executive Director in absence). The panel is attended by all key professionals with an expected set of reports being provided in advance. Legal Gateway Panel sets out timescales, agrees non-negotiables in pre-proceedings, agrees entry into care (or not) and gives agreement for the range of assessments and services that should be in place. Throughout care proceedings and pre-proceedings each case is reviewed by the service manager to monitor progress and further consider care planning and final care planning decisions.

We currently have 18 (37 children) families in pre-proceedings and 38 (63 children) families subject to care proceedings. There has been an increase in the number of children in pre-proceedings following a period of low numbers earlier in the year. In the quarter October to December 2024, only 24% concluded within the 16-week timescale this is impacted by legacy cases (with 9 families, 17 children in pre-proceeding for over 5 months dating back to May) and staff turnover.

In relation to care proceedings, Bury make a low-level urgent application which supports good planning, and in October - December 2024 most applications were made in a timely way following a decision at Legal Gateway Panel. Over the last 12 months we have seen improvement in the timeliness of care proceedings, in April – June 2024 only 9% of care proceedings concluded in 26 weeks and in October to December 2024 55% concluded within 26 weeks. However, as at the end of December, there are still children from 9 families with ongoing court proceedings that have lasted longer than a year.

The Director of Social Care and Early Help has monthly meetings with the AD for the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) and court matters are discussed, performance reports are shared, and practice issues are discussed.

### **Corporate Parenting Responsibilities**

In the last year the Corporate Parenting strategy has been updated and there has been a refresh of the Corporate Parenting Action plan with strengthened partnership oversight and buy-in. The Corporate Parenting Board has multi-agency working groups focusing on transition, emotional health and wellbeing, and building relationships – all areas picked by our young people as the things that matter most. The Corporate Parenting Board is well attended and co-chaired by care experienced young people. Each report has a child friendly version to ensure they are accessible to young people, and we discuss all reports with young people outside of the meeting.

There has been lots of progress in relation to the Corporate Parenting Action Plan; key policies have been signed off including a new housing policy which reflects a real commitment from the council in support of our care leavers. Recent events have taken place to encourage local businesses to offer work opportunities to care leavers. The number of apprenticeships available within the council to care leavers has significantly increased this year with 10 young people securing apprenticeships, and 7 sustaining those apprenticeships.

In July 2024 National Care Leavers Adviser (DfE) Mark Riddell visited Bury and was positive about the tangible progress made in Bury following his original review in May 2023, particularly our town centre-based care experienced hub/drop in and our refreshed housing policy.

### **Sufficiency & commissioning of homes for children in care**

We use the Placement Northwest (PNW) frameworks to find placements. Through the year we have seen more children placed in residential care, partly reflecting the complexity of need, but partly reflecting the insufficiency of foster homes either provided by Bury itself or within the Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) market. Bury has 48 children in residential care, with 8 of those children under the age of 15 having a care plan reflected that their needs could be best met in foster care.

Bury have been making strenuous efforts to enhance capacity and skills across the year and to limit exposure to the residential market – improving fees, allowances and support for foster carers. We launched our first Mockingbird constellation in March 2024 with a second constellation launching in January 2025. We have also sought and gained cabinet approval to establish two of our own Children's Homes and are supporters and participants in the GM work – Skyline (first children's home purchased in Bury, with support from one of

our Heads of Service), GM Fostering Hub, and the wider GM Combined Authority (GMCA) Regional Care Co-Operative pathfinder.

The issue for Bury is not its overall exposure to the external market in placements – in total, we remain below regional average usage per head of child population in all the main types (residential, IFA and Supported Accommodation and Independent Living (SAILS)), but rather the shift over the past 18 months from being a very low user to being a slightly below average user. In recognition of the centrality of commissioning to the future of children's services and the council, we are in the process of reviewing, restructuring and reinforcing the function, with a new, more robust structure in place by the Spring of 2025.

During 2024, Commissioning arrangements in Bury have been reviewed and this review led to an initial restructure aimed at bringing additional capacity and to support more strategic commissioning arrangements in line with the sufficiency need. A new post has already been created to work with IFAs to build relationships and this has opened an avenue to bespoke family finding events for some of our young people who need to step down from residential care. Alongside this, we have also reviewed our Sufficiency Strategy to ensure we are best placed to meet the needs of children and young people in our care and care experienced young people.

### **The stability of homes for children in care**

The stability of the homes of children in care (how long they have been living in their current home, how frequently they have moved in the recent past) at end December 2024 showed long term stability at 72% with the percentage of all children in care with 3 or more homes in the last 12 months down at 6%. Both these statistics are better than the national average (68% and 10%, respectively) and reflect what has been a growing strength over the past two years (in December 2022, long term stability stood at 53%).

To reduce placement moves a disruption review process has been established so that the reasons that placements end in an untimely way can be better understood and learning shared. Placement stability meetings are held when concerns begin to arise to try and address issues early.

In-house foster care appears to show a higher level of placement instability than IFA placements. However, the reason for this is the fact that emergency out of hours placements are made with in house carers only and are usually very short term until more detailed matching can be undertaken. Implementation of Mockingbird is known to reduce placement disruption and the fact that 2 will have been established this last year should improve in house stability further. There are plans to improve the emotional health offer to children in care and their carers in the coming year through a support team guided by a clinical psychologist helping professionals and carers to better understand the behaviour and needs of children in care and enabling them to better support them, which should also have a positive impact in reducing placement breakdown.

### **Fostering & Adoption**

2023/24 saw a net increase of 7 new general fostering households (14 approvals in total) and resignations were low. Our offer to foster carers was reviewed in 2022/23 and has been well received, with Bury comparing well. The challenge is still to enable more children to be placed with Bury foster carers locally, the use of IFA placements is still considerable especially for sibling groups and older children. Bury has 66% of children in foster placements which compares well with statistical comparators, however we have seen a reduction in the number of children being placed with Bury foster carers (now 43%).

Following the resignation of the chair, the Foster Carers Association (FCA) is being re launched with support from Salford Council FCA and we hope to engage more carers going forwards. Our second constellation of Mockingbird will be launched in early January aimed at greater support for foster carers to support children remaining with carers.

There is considerable regional work with GMCA to maximise the benefits of all GM Local Authorities working together to recruit more foster carers. This is DFE funded and includes a recruitment campaign and a Fostering recruitment hub.

Adoption services are provided by Regional Adoption Agency, Adoption Now. Bury children with an adoption plan are allocated to an Adoption Now social worker seconded from Bury and progress of children with adoption plans is tracked monthly within Bury. In the last year there has been success in placing 6 children in Fostering for Adoption placements which reduces placement moves for children and positively impacts upon the development of early attachment. The biggest challenge is the national shortage of adopters currently meaning that children are waiting longer than is desirable for adoptive families, which in turn can lead to the need to pursue more costly inter-agency adoptions.

## **Permanence**

Permanence planning is considered at the earliest opportunity and is tracked through a system of panels and meetings supported by trackers. We have reviewed our arrangements and will strengthen this by bringing together the different trackers along with ensuring better LCS system (the children's social care management information system) functionality to capture permanence planning and support better reporting.

Adoption Now attend Legal Gateway Panel, so they have oversight of children in court proceedings and pre-proceedings. Children in pre-proceedings are closely tracked and have review points to prevent drift and delay for children in achieving permanence. This will be complimented by a new PLO Impact Board from early 2025.

Children who have a permanence plan of long-term foster carer matching is reviewed and approved at fostering panel. Special guardianship orders are encouraged for children placed with connected carers and where appropriate for those in long term foster care too. 13 children have exited care via SGO's during the last year, mainly at the end of court proceedings, but for a small number from long term care.

Adoption tracking takes place monthly to ensure that permanence plans through adoption are progressed as quickly as possible, if any delays are identified then the Head of Service can escalate the issue within Adoption Now or the service. This has included ensuring Bury children have access to Activity Days for example. Early permanence placements – children placed with a foster carer also approved as an adopter - are high for this last year - 6 since 1st April – reducing the need for moves of home for young children and showing how we identify and tracking children early for adoption.

The IRO role is now having greater oversight of practice, plans and arrangements for children in care and this will be further strengthened via an IRO monitoring approach that focusses on Permanence Planning at the second review for a child in care (at 4 months) and timely and consistent use of the dispute resolution protocol to support their oversight of expeditious care planning arrangements for children and young people.

## **Children with Complex Needs**

We currently have 290 children open with an EHCP plan across Children's Social Care, 99 are within the dedicated Children with Disabilities (CwD) team, 70 are looked after, and 21 are Care Leavers with the remaining children supported across other teams.

We have 3 young people with DoLo and are currently awaiting their transfer to the court of protection, with a further 2 children in court proceedings where we are requesting family court to agree to a DoLo. In addition:

- We have currently had 4 young people heard at legal gateway and we will be filing/issuing applications shortly.
- In addition, we have 45 young people aged between 16 and 18 years old. The number of these young people who may require a DoLo has been brought into question by a Supreme Court judgement that ruled that a 16- or 17-year old's

parents cannot consent to arrangements that deprive the child of their liberty. Prior to this our estimate would have been that 6 further children who have turned 16 years old would need to have a DoLo application made, and these are in progress. We will be seeking legal oversight on some of the young people within this cohort to ensure that we have no unlawful deprivations of liberty.

For children with disabilities who need to be in care, the CwD team provides the commissioning team with an easy-read pen picture of the child that includes pictures denoting their likes, dislikes and containing quotes of what other significant adults would say are their strengths and vulnerabilities. This is provided to support the prospective placement and the carer's understanding of need and also to gain an insight into the child's character, endearing and lovable qualities, making them come to life on paper. We have recently overhauled all current search documentation to ensure the child is seen first and not the disability. This has been a successful approach in that we have been able to identify placements when there is scarcity for almost all our children with complex needs. We aspire to identify forever family homes for our children, where appropriate, and where this is not possible: robust and well scrutinised residential placements.

We provide respite through short break packages where there is an assessed need. This may be the provision of a sessional activity via Action for Children, The Jewish Fed or through direct payments whereby parents can employ a PA. In circumstances where need is high, we can refer to Cambeck for 28 overnights for families or if Cambeck is unable to meet need we can commence a placement search to identify an alternative respite provision. In these instances, we also have agency care staff that have the training, skills and experience to provide hours of respite where we may judge that a typical PA provision is not appropriate.

For children and young people judged at risk of tier 4 admission or family breakdown we refer to the Dynamic Support Register. This can result in involvement from Barnardo's keyworkers and the Specialist support team. Barnardo's provide a level of respite to allow the family to benefit as much as possible from functional assessment and positive behaviour support which are undertaken. Whilst this is strictly not a form of respite it does allow important space for families to breathe, reflect and change in response to the interventions delivered.

## **Health Needs of Children in Care**

Performance reporting around Health checks and Dental checks points to issues around timeliness (& lags in recording for checks that have taken place through the year). Recently, there have been delays for some children having their Initial Health Assessment (IHA) once they are looked after. IHA tracking is now in place via a weekly meeting with health colleagues and the CSC service manager, to ensure all children who are in the care of the Local Authority have an update to date IHA or review health assessment. The process has been reviewed and enhanced business support is in place to ensure timely requests are made. We are reviewing our processes around review health assessments to ensure timely reviews take place.

Health assessments quality is reviewed on a quarterly basis and now that the Children in Care Health team is at full capacity staffing, this will begin to include a health needs analysis to provide further understanding of the health needs of our children in care. The areas that we know are current concerns (via health assessments and our young people telling us) are dental access and emotional health and well-being support.

Bury Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) have put protocols in place to ensure that our care experienced young people wait no longer than 4 weeks for initial assessment. Children and carers tell us that more is needed to promote this new pathway and to broaden the support available to young people, however carers are clear about how they access emergency support around emotional health via CAMHS. We are also securing additional resource to create an in-house emotional health and wellbeing service (note earlier in the home stability section), and in the interim we have access to CAMHS for

consultation on complex cases. Once we have established our in-house service, we will be able to ensure that they consider all SDQs that indicate concern, to advise on how we best support the young person.

Access to dental services is an issue nationally, which GM Integrated Care Board (ICB) have raised repeatedly with NHS England. Access to dental services for our looked after children is prioritised with 2 child friendly dental practices and a referral pathway if carers/young people are struggling to access dental care.

### **Education of Children in Care and the Virtual School**

The Virtual School has high expectations as corporate parents to support cared for children and care experienced young people to aspire to a bright future. The school-aged Personal Education Plan (PEP) form has been improved and expanded to be strengths based, include more pupil voice, and focus on Careers Information, Advice and Guidance (CIAG). All PEPs are individually quality assured, and feedback provided to schools and Childrens Social Care (CSC).

Transition support has been provided by our Learning Mentor, Education Employment and Training (EET) Lead and Inclusion Advisor for children in care and children with Child in Need or Child Protection plans in year 6 (last year of primary school) and for children in care in year 11 (last year of secondary school). This includes additional visits to schools, 1:1 sessions, including Lego Play and support with college applications. A Year 6 Aspirations Day was held in summer 2024, including a visit to Bury College.

Pupil Premium Grant (PPG)+ is being monitored and tracked to ensure it is used to support attainment and progress, including through use of tuition. All year 6 and Year 11 pupils had access to tuition through the National Tuition Programme. Schools are encouraged, through the structure of the target section of the PEP, to fund tuition through PPG+.

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities – ensuring needs are identified and support is put in at the earliest opportunity as part of the graduated response. This has been achieved through strategic and direct support to education settings and CSC from the Virtual School SEND Lead and wider team, targeted use of Educational Psychology and development of the Virtual School Speech and Language Therapy offer. One can see the success of the team in supporting children with additional needs through the number of children identified as having additional needs once they are in care.

There is priority for all children in care and care experienced young people to achieve good outcomes at each stage achieved through effective synthesis and use of data: termly tracking of attainment and progress, comparison of regional and national data when available. A priority is to apply this to the Early Years Foundation Stage cohort. There has been a concerted drive to improve attendance and reduce persistent absence and severe absence levels in our cared for children and care experienced cohort. Attendance and suspensions are tracked on a fortnightly basis and reported half termly to stakeholders through effective use of data from Welfare Call and a dedicated Attendance Officer. Term Time Holiday requests are reviewed at Director level with Virtual School input. The approach used to focus on the attendance of children in care needs to be extended to the monitoring and review of attendance to children on Child In Need and Child Protection plans.

We aim to ensure that our cared for children and care experienced young people are accessing Education Employment or Training (EET) not just at statutory school age but post-16 years of age and beyond. We monitor children moving out of borough and ensuring suitable education provision is in place so that the children miss as little education as possible. An intensive and bespoke support offer for 16- and 17-year-olds aims to help them sustain EET, with schemes to promote Higher Education, and bespoke support for NEET 18+ Care Leavers working with VS team.

Over the past year, the Virtual School team have undertaken various continuous professional development (CPD) opportunities, and all members of the team now hold a level 5 diploma in Trauma Informed Practice. Additional capacity has been created in the team through the Deputy Virtual School Headteacher post and expansion to include a dedicated Speech and Language Therapist and an Attendance Officer.

We also aim to train and inform the wider children's workforce. The annual Virtual School Conference now established to promote the education and achievement of all Bury's children in care and children with a social worker: 150 delegates attended across children's services attended in the summer term. A comprehensive training package has been delivered to schools and other professionals through members of the Virtual School team and external providers, including bespoke and targeted training to individual schools and examples such as effective use of PPG+, the SEND Graduated Response, strategies for emotional regulation and regular PEP training for schools and social workers, targeting schools with larger numbers of our children on roll.

Indicators of the impact on the experiences and outcomes of children:

- PEP completion consistently above 95%
- 47% PEPs rated at least "Good"
- No permanent exclusions of a Bury cared for child or care experienced young person but suspensions for 2023-24 at 13.5%, up from 12.6% the previous year
- 16–17-year-old EET rates sustained at 85%
- 2024 Phonics outcomes in line with 2023 CLA national
- 2024 KS2 outcomes (provisional): RWM combined in line with 2023 national for CLA
- Reduction in Persistent absence from 22.5% in 2022-23 to 20.3% 2023-24
- Data for KS4 is not able to be compared nationally yet
- 27% care leavers progressed onto Level 2 or 3 courses end of academic year 2023-24.
- School moves decreased from 11 to 9%

### **Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC)**

We continue to participate in the National Transfer Scheme and work in line with the agreed transfer arrangements. We have been able to achieve timely transfers for young people over school age due to placement sufficiency in semi-independent placements offering us suitable accommodation within Bury and GM. Younger children are a greater challenge with the shortage of foster carer homes in Bury and the wider region (only one child is placed with Bury Foster Carers) and this has resulted in 2 children being placed at a distance from Bury, one in Liverpool and one outside the region in London.

Our UASC cohort has risen in number but remains at around a third of the initial nationally expected level (0.1% of the local child population), while making up 4% of the total number of children in care in Bury and ex-UASC make up 16% of care experienced 18- to 25-year-old cohort currently supported by Bury.

Children aged under 18 years are all male and originated from 6 countries, with a third originating from Iran. The current group speaks 7 languages with Kurdish most common. Bury have developed strong commissioning arrangements with a local provider that offers specialist UASC homes and we have seen positive outcomes for engagement in education and training and moves on to independence. This has supported nearly all children to be placed within Greater Manchester, with just one outside the region.

We have revised the internal referral process for UASC children to reduce the impact of change of worker and offer better continuity with all new referrals being received into the Care and Support Service. Since the National Transfer Scheme was implemented, we have seen a decline in spontaneous arrivals with just one within this financial year to date. The completion of age assessments remains challenging, with their infrequency limiting

social workers familiarity, although the Regional Migration Partnership Training offer is available and is used by staff.

### **3.0 CONCLUSION**

Despite growing challenges in finding family homes for children in care (both fostering and adoption), there are clear signs of improving stability in the homes for Bury's children in care. We are also seeing greater stability and improving educational outcomes for children in care, supported by a strongly performing Virtual School. The Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking cohort of children is growing and their needs are generally well met and their outcomes positive – something that tracks through the older ex-UASC care experienced cohort as well. We believe that there is scope for further improvement in all respects, particularly in better meeting the pressing emotional and mental health needs of young people and in more proactive planning through to permanence. We will be seeking to address these in the coming year.

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**List of Background Papers:-** [Inspecting local authority children's services - GOV.UK](#), particularly the Evaluation section, part 2

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Executive Director sign off Date: \_\_\_\_\_