

Report on the options for Children's Services in the city of Bradford Metropolitan District Council

**Report to the Secretary of State for
Education**

January 2022

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Executive Summary

In October 2018 Ofsted found that local authority services for children in Bradford were inadequate. The Department for Education issued the authority with an Improvement Notice and an Improvement Advisor was appointed to support the authority to take forward improvement. An Improvement Board was established, and a substantial improvement plan was put in place. However, although progress was noted, both Ofsted and the Improvement Advisor expressed ongoing concerns about the pace of improvement.

In September 2021, I was appointed by the Secretary of State for Education as Children's Services Commissioner, following serious concerns highlighted by Ofsted in relation to residential care and care planning in the Council, as well as a series of Ofsted monitoring visits all reporting on the slow pace of change in improving the quality of core social work practice.

I was asked to bring together evidence to assess the Council's capacity and capability to improve itself in a reasonable time frame and recommend whether or not this evidence is sufficiently strong to suggest that long term sustainable improvement to children's social care functions can be achieved, should operational service control remain within the Council. I was also asked to advise on alternative delivery and governance arrangements for children's social care functions.

Findings

Council leaders recognise the challenges for Bradford's children and young people and have rightly prioritised children's services. They have acted promptly to ensure that the service had access to resources, including significant financial support, to reverse previous cuts and support improvement. Elected members from all parties have been appropriately concerned about outcomes for children and young people. There is cross party support for children's services.

However, there is no clear agreed partnership vision that is owned by all partners and which is driven by leaders at a strategic level and delivered by practitioners working together on the ground. This has been a major gap and has impacted on the ability of partners to work together to deliver better outcomes for children in Bradford. The social and economic context of Bradford means that many children and young people in the city will require support if they are to achieve good outcomes. This cannot be done by any single agency. It requires agencies to work together at both an individual and strategic level to ensure that children and young people have access to a range of high-quality support and services. It is evident that this level of partnership has not been in place for a number of years.

The need for improved partnership working is recognised by the senior leaders of all agencies and partners are committed to working together to improve relationships, services and outcomes for children and families in Bradford.

There are two key factors that have impacted on improvement: workforce stability and relationships between children's services and the corporate centre. In common with many authorities that are judged inadequate, Bradford has experienced difficulties in

recruiting permanent social workers. Whilst the local authority has, with the support of an external consultant, undertaken considerable work to strengthen its recruitment and retention strategy this has taken too long to put in place. At the time that my review was conducted Bradford had 124 social work vacancies. These were being covered by 173 agency social workers.

The relationship between children's services and the corporate centre is more complex. The Leader and Chief Executive took prompt action to secure the resources required by children's services to support improvement after inspection and have continued to provide additional investment where needed. However, the corporate centre did not fully understand the pressures on managers in children's services and had insufficient knowledge of the detail of practice and processes to know how best to provide the support required.

Attempts were made to address this, for example by embedding IT and HR staff within children's services. This was not as effective as it could have been as these staff were following the same corporate processes but simply from within children's services. The attendance of the Strategic Director for Corporate Resources at Children's Services Leadership meetings has improved relationships at a strategic level. Senior leaders should have addressed this sooner and involved front line managers in identifying solutions.

A new leadership team was recruited for children's services following the 2018 inspection. The new Director took up his post in July 2019 and the Assistant Director in November of that year. They commenced a major re-organisation of children's services into a locality structure to improve relationships with partners, children and families. The new leadership structure in children's services was not filled until March 2020.

The 2020 senior leadership team in children's services were all experienced and committed. However, for most, it was their first time in a substantive role at a higher level of seniority and they had come into a more senior role under very challenging circumstances. Consequently, the approach to improvement in children's services was not underpinned by a significant depth of experience, and at times this resulted in a focus on excellence which got in the way of achieving 'good enough'. There was a lack of pragmatic decision making that was focused on getting the basics right as a foundation for further improvement.

From 2019, children's services took a programme management approach to improvement. An experienced programme manager and team of project coordinators were employed and an eighty-two-page improvement plan developed. However, the size and complexity of the plan resulted a focus on process and the plan itself rather than practice and impact with managers in the service reporting that they felt monitored rather than supported.

The Leader, Lead Member for Children and Families and the Chief Executive reported that the issues raised by Ofsted in relation to children's homes and the placement of the young person in July 2021 came as a shock to them. They were aware that there had been a challenging inspection in one of the authority's children's homes as a result

of the mix of children in the home, which highlighted the issue of sufficiency. However, all report that they were unaware of the scale of the recent issues and were not briefed about the placement of the young person in unsuitable unregulated accommodation until after Ofsted had written to the Director with their concerns. This undermined the confidence of the council leadership in the Director of Children's Services.

The Director of Children's Services resigned in October 2021 and the Deputy Director for Children's Social Care left in November 2021. The role of Director is being covered by the Deputy Director for Education who is acting up into this role. Two experienced interim senior leaders have been appointed to the posts of Deputy Director for Children's Social Care and Assistant Director, Safeguarding, Commissioning and Provider Services. The leadership team have come together quickly and appear to be working well together. They have taken action to simplify the improvement plan and review structures and processes.

However, this means that three years after the inspection Bradford Children's Services does not have a permanent senior leadership team in place. Whilst some of these changes have not been in the control of the local authority it is unsettling for staff and impacts on the ability of children's services to build effective working relationships with partners. Further change is likely as a new permanent leadership team will have to be recruited.

The Leadership of the Council has demonstrated a commitment to children's services and have allocated significant resources to supporting the service to take forward the improvements necessary. Elected members from all parties are committed to working together to ensure that all children in Bradford are supported to achieve good outcomes. However, it is three years since the last inspection and progress has been too slow. Children's services continue to face significant challenges in relation to securing a permanent leadership team, stabilising the workforce, improving practice and strengthening partnership working. It is my assessment that it will take a period of eighteen months to two years to bring about the level of changes necessary. At this time, I do not think that the Council will be able to achieve this alone.

For this reason, I am suggesting that control of children's services be removed from the Council for a period and an alternative delivery model developed.

During the review I have considered with the Leader and the Chief Executive the options for doing this. The Council Leaders have been clear that their main concern is to ensure that children and young people in Bradford have the support that they need to achieve good outcomes.

Whilst I have made clear my preferred alternative delivery model is an Executive Commissioner (main report), I understand the legal and technical issues which constrain the use of this model at the current time. Due to these constraints the local authority has indicated to the Department for Education that a voluntary trust is their preferred option.

1. Introduction

On 29 October 2018 Ofsted published the outcome of an inspection of children's services in Bradford undertaken between 17 and 28 September. It concluded that local authority services for children in Bradford were 'Inadequate'. The Department for Education issued the authority with an Improvement Notice on 4 December 2018 and an Improvement Advisor was appointed to support the authority to take forward improvement.

An Improvement Board was established, and a substantial improvement plan was put in place. However, although progress was noted, both Ofsted and the Improvement Advisor expressed ongoing concerns about the pace of improvement.

On 7 July 2021 Ofsted wrote to the Director of Children's Services in Bradford to express '*serious concern in relation to the safety, well-being and experiences of children in the care of Bradford Local Authority.*' The letter was copied to the Department for Education. In response to these issues the Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families issued a Statutory Direction to Bradford on 26 July 2021.

I was appointed by the Secretary of State for Education as Children's Services Commissioner on 14 September 2021.

2. Terms of Reference

The Direction sets out the following requirements of the Commissioner: In line with the serious concerns Ofsted has raised in relation to the safety, well-being and experiences of children in the care of Bradford Council, as well as the slow pace of improvement set out in the Monitoring Visit reports, the Department is considering whether children's social care services will need to be removed from Council control, for a period of time, in order to bring about sustainable improvement (and whether there are compelling reasons not to do so). The Children's Services Commissioner is therefore expected to take the following steps:

1. To issue any necessary instructions to the Council for the purpose of securing immediate improvement in the Council's delivery of children's social care functions; to identify ongoing improvement requirements; and to recommend any additional support required to deliver those improvements.
2. To bring together evidence to assess the Council's capacity and capability to improve itself in a reasonable time frame and recommend whether or not this evidence is sufficiently strong to suggest that long term sustainable improvement to children's social care functions can be achieved, should operational service control remain within the Council.
3. To advise on relevant alternative delivery and governance arrangements for children's social care functions, outside of the operational control of the Council, taking into account local circumstances and the views of the Council and key partners.
4. To report to the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State by 14 January 2022.

3. Process

In completing this report, I have reviewed the concerns identified by Ofsted in their 2018 inspection, the actions taken by senior leaders in the authority and the impact of those actions. Where sufficient progress has not been made I have tried to understand the reasons for this and to identify what actions could be taken to address this.

I have considered the available background information, including the reports of the Improvement Advisor, minutes of the Improvement Board and the findings of Ofsted Monitoring Visits.

I have met with a range of partners and stakeholders including local health services, West Yorkshire Police, schools, Ofsted, the Designated Family Judge for West Yorkshire, the Independent Scrutineer of the Bradford Safeguarding Children Partnership and the Improvement Advisor. I am grateful to them for their assistance.

Within the authority I have met frequently with the political and officer leadership of the Council. I have worked with the Interim Director of Children's Services and her leadership team, to support them with planned and developing improvement activity to identify any additional areas for improvement and development, and to advise them on how best to address those.

In addition, I have met with a range staff from across children's services, virtually and in person, and visited front line services to discuss the issues from their perspectives and to support them with their role in improving practice. Due to the time available and the pandemic I have not met with children and young people.

I would like to thank all those I have met with for their time and for the open and positive way they engaged with me. This greatly helped me with this task.

4. Local Authority Context

Bradford Metropolitan District Council is the fifth largest metropolitan local authority district in England in terms of population. Over 530,000 people live in the authority. Nearly one third of the population is aged under twenty, making Bradford the youngest city in the UK. The results of the 2011 census found Bradford had become more ethnically diverse. The authority has the largest proportion of people of Pakistani ethnic origin (20%) in England and more than 150 languages are spoken within the District. The largest proportion of the population identified themselves as White British (64%), although this had decreased since the 2001 census.

The local economy is worth £11.6 billion and is the tenth largest city economy in England and the third largest in the Yorkshire and Humber region. However, despite this, Bradford has high rates of unemployment and poverty. The most recent unemployment figures for Bradford, published by the Office for National Statistics on 14th December 2021, showed that 7.9% of the working age population were unemployed. This is higher than the rate for the Leeds City Region (5%), Yorkshire and the Humber (4.9%) and the United Kingdom (4.6%).

Bradford District is ranked as the 13th most deprived local authority in England (where 1 is the most deprived local authority and 317 is the least deprived). When the previous indices were published in 2015, Bradford was ranked 19th most deprived. 34% of the District's Lower Super Output Areas fall within the 10% most deprived neighbourhoods in England. Over 60,000 of Bradford's children and young people (over 40% of the total) live in neighbourhoods classed as the 10% most deprived in England. Research has shown that children living in these areas are up to 10 times more likely to require a child protection plan or to enter care than their peers in the most affluent neighbourhoods.

In 2019/20, an estimated 38% of children were living in low income households, the highest proportion in Yorkshire and the Humber. Data from the Department for Work and Pensions for 2019/20 found 48,100 children aged under 16 were living in families with low incomes. This was a 3% on the previous year and will have increased again as a result of the pandemic. Research has highlighted Bradford as an area where child poverty rates are rising faster than the national trend. Poverty and deprivation have a negative impact on outcomes for children and this is evident in Bradford where the health and wellbeing of children is generally worse compared with the England average. The authority has higher levels of childhood obesity, teenage pregnancy and accidental injury. Infant mortality rates in Bradford are also significantly higher than the comparative value for England.

The Council plan ([Council Plan | Bradford Council](#)) was updated in 2021 to take account of the challenges of the pandemic. It identifies six priorities that will be delivered by 'an enabling council':

- Better skills, more good jobs and a growing economy
- Decent homes
- Good start, great schools
- Better health, better lives
- Safe, strong and active communities
- A sustainable district

The third priority 'Good start, great school' ([Good start, great schools | Bradford Council](#)) is the primary priority for children. It sets out the Council's ambition for children, '*We want Bradford to be a great place to be a child – a place where all our children and young people are given the best start in life and can develop their talents and abilities to the fullest extent*'. It sets out the challenges facing children and young people, priorities, and the success measures, all of which relate to education:

1. GCSE Level 4 English and Maths results to close the gap with the national average.
2. Reduce persistent absence faster than national trend.
3. Improve Key Stage 2 results in line with national trends in Reading, Writing and Maths.
4. Improve Key Stage 1 Phonics in line with national trends.

Three of the nine priorities in relation to 'Better health, better lives' ([Better health, better lives | Bradford Council](#)) are specifically related to children:

- Strive to make sure that all children are safe. We will prevent and reduce the impact of adverse childhood experiences. We will achieve an improved Ofsted assessment for our children's services.
- Support the protection and welfare of vulnerable children, including providing specialist advice and representation to assist Children's Social Care in achieving their improvement goals following the Ofsted inspection in September 2018.
- Continue to support the continuation of the innovative approach within the Family Court in West Yorkshire.

Four of the nine success measures for this priority are focussed on children:

- Reduce levels of childhood obesity.
- Bring percentage of referrals to Children's Social Care in the year which were within 12 months of previous referral closing in line with our statistical neighbours.
- Reduce percentage of children in care with three or more placements during the previous year in line with our statistical neighbours.
- Improve the emotional wellbeing of Children in Care.

Analysis

Bradford Metropolitan District Council contains some of the most disadvantaged communities in the country, which have been disproportionately affected by COVID 19. The impact of disadvantage on the wellbeing of children and young people is inevitably considerable. Consequently, a significant minority of children and young people in the area will require access to a range of high-quality services provided by the local authority and its partners if they are to achieve good outcomes. This relatively high demand for children's services in the city will require strong and sustained resourcing and high-quality leadership to succeed.

Children are well referenced in the Council Plan. Reference is made in the Council Plan to the Children and Young People's Plan. This is considered in more detail in the partnership section.

5. Political and Council Leadership

Bradford Metropolitan District Council is divided into thirty Electoral Wards. Each ward elects three councillors. Elections are held in May, when one third of the 90 seats (one in each ward) are contested and the successful candidate is elected for a period of four years. In one year out of four no elections are held. Following the last election the Council has 51 Labour members, 25 Conservative, 7 Liberal Democrat and 7 members from other parties and independent councillors. The current Labour administration took control of the local authority in May 2014. This was the first time that a single party had been in control of the council for fifteen years.

The current Leader has been in the role since 2016. She was the Chair of the West Yorkshire Combined Authority and was appointed to the Transport portfolio by the West Yorkshire Mayor in May 2021.

The current Chief Executive was appointed in 2015. She joined from another local authority in the region where she had been Chief Executive and where children's services were rated as 'Good' in 2012.

Both the Leader and the Chief Executive are committed to Bradford and want the best for its residents. They have high expectations of themselves and others, this can be experienced as challenging and requires strong leadership from Directors.

The children's services portfolio is divided between two Lead Members: a Lead Member for Education, Employment and Skills and a Lead Member for Children and Families. This division is not unusual in a large authority.

The Lead Member for Children and Families became the portfolio holder in May 2021 when the previous Lead Member, who had been in post since 2018, lost their seat in the local election. The Lead Member has previous professional experience of social care, which gives her an understanding of many of the issues facing children's services. The Lead Member has recently assumed responsibility for chairing the Corporate Parenting Group.

The Lead Member for Education, Employment and Skills was appointed in May 2016 when the previous portfolio holder was elected Leader. The portfolio covers all education services provided by children's services as well as employment and skills which sit in other parts of the council.

The two Lead Members have a good working relationships and regular joint briefings are used to ensure that both members have an overview of developments across the service.

The Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee consists of nine elected members (2 Conservative who are the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Committee, 5 Labour, 1 Liberal Democrat and 1 Independent) and 4 co-opted committee members two of whom have voting rights. The Committee meets regularly and appears to provide appropriate support and challenge to children's services.

Although the Corporate Parenting Group has always met regularly, corporate parenting was identified as an area of weakness at an early stage of the improvement journey. The terms of reference and model of corporate parenting were reviewed and consultation was undertaken with young people and carers about the role of the Corporate Parenting Group. However, due to changes in senior leadership within children's services it is only recently (November 2021) that the new arrangements were formally agreed and signed off by panel members. The Corporate Parenting Group is now chaired by the Lead Member for Children's Services.

Actions taken by Political and Council Leadership in response to failings identified by Ofsted

When weaknesses have been identified in children's services by Ofsted the Leader and Chief Executive have taken prompt action to secure significant additional resources for children's services. This is referenced in the 2018 inspection report and in almost every subsequent Monitoring Visit.

When the service has requested additional funding for improvement, for example additional staffing as part of the re-structure of the service, strengthening of administrative and business support, and creation of a project team to lead improvement, the political and corporate leadership have provided this.

Both the Leader and the Chief Executive have been visible and have tried to provide appropriate support and challenge to the Children's Services Leadership Team. When concerns were identified regarding the pace of progress and issues about the support provided from the corporate centre the Chief Executive agreed to additional staff from Human Resources and IT to be located within children's services. When the service has requested additional funding to support its improvement journey this has been provided.

When concerns continued to be expressed by Ofsted and the Department for Education regarding the pace of improvement the Chief Executive arranged for the Strategic Director for Corporate Resources, who frequently deputises for the Chief Executive, to be released from some of her responsibilities to enable her to support children's services. The Children's Leadership Team reported that this was helpful and provided more focus and direction.

The Leader, Lead Member for Children and Families and the Chief Executive reported that the issues raised by Ofsted in relation to children's homes and the placement of the young person in July 2021 came as a shock to them. They were aware that there had been a challenging inspection in one of the authority's children's homes as result of the mix of children in the home, which highlighted the issue of sufficiency. However, all report that they were unaware of the scale of the recent issues and were not briefed about the placement of the young person in unsuitable unregulated accommodation until after Ofsted had written to the Director with their concerns. This undermined the confidence of the Council leadership in the Director of Children's Services.

Following the concerns raised by Ofsted in the summer of 2021 the Chief Executive established a weekly meeting with leaders in children's services and corporate colleagues. The purpose of this meeting was to review progress and to address any issues that were impeding improvement. However, the meeting quickly became too focused on detailed oversight of the service.

When the Ofsted Monitoring visit in September 2021 raised concerns about the welfare of some children in the care of the local authority and the lack of progress, the Chief Executive discussed these findings with the Director of Children's Services who left the Council shortly afterwards.

The Lead Member for Children and Families is a passionate advocate for the service. She is providing appropriate challenge to the Leader and Chief Executive, where necessary, on behalf of the service. The Lead Member has undertaken a programme of visits to teams across the Service and taken on responsibility for chairing the Corporate Parenting Group.

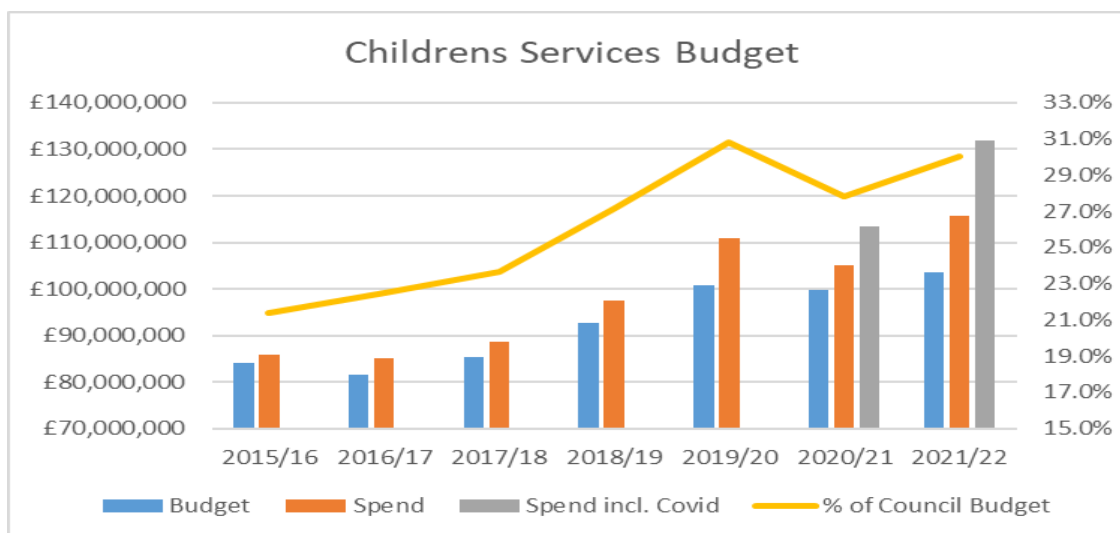
Finance

The Council has had to deal with significant financial pressures in the years preceding the pandemic. Since 2011, the Council has had to find over £300m in savings and extra income because of national spending reductions, increasing demand and rising costs.

This has required difficult decisions to be taken about services and priorities. From 2011 budgets for prevention and early help services for children were reduced by over £15 million. These savings reflected grant reductions and a desire to avoid reductions to statutory services. However, as prevention and early help services help to reduce demand for more intensive services in the longer term, this reduction had a cumulative effect leading to an increase in demand for social work support, resulting in increased pressure on practitioners. This approach was not unique to Bradford and these cuts have now been reversed following a detailed cost and demand analysis undertaken by children's services, Finance and Human Resources. However, it has meant that posts, some of which had previously been deleted, have had to be re-established and recruited to. Children's services have also had to work with partners to reinstate the early help services that had been significantly depleted.

There has been significant investment in the core budget for children's services since 2015/16, which has increased by 23%, to redress previous reductions and establish a core budget appropriate to current demands. However, expenditure has risen more quickly, rising by 35% since 2015/16 due mainly to the high use of agency staff and costs of placements for children looked after (the rise is even higher, 54%, if Covid related expenditure is included).

The proportion of Council budget spent in children's services is 50% higher than the 2015/16 position (Table 1).



Clearly this level of increase is unsustainable in the long term, but the local authority has rightly recognised that it will take time to address the current issues in children’s services and has committed to retain the current level of expenditure over the next three years in order to create time and opportunity for improvement.

The 2022/23 budget proposals for children’s services assume:

- Full Inflationary uplift: “Inflationary increases for Pay (2%), Energy Costs (5%), Contract Prices (4% CPI), National Living Wage (6.6%) and National Insurance Contributions (1.25%), will also be provided. Inflationary increases will be weighted towards Adults and Children’s Social Care as these areas are most impacted by National Living Wage increases for example.”
- ‘Demographic’ Growth of £625k per annum, on cumulative basis
- £125k uplift to base budget for additional legal support to service
- £7.5m investment (funded from reserves), to be targeted towards delivery of sustainable improvements
- A willingness to use uncommitted reserves to support “Invest to Save” projects

The longer-term financial modelling undertaken by the authority has identified that there is considerable scope to reduce expenditure. For example, recruiting a full establishment of social workers would save at least £5 million per annum in lower agency costs. Reducing the overall cost of placements to 2020/21 levels would generate a saving of £7.1m and a reduction to 2019/20 levels would save £12.3 million per year.

Analysis

Council leaders have prioritised children’s services. They have acted promptly to ensure that the service had access to the resources they needed, including significant financial support, required for improvement. This has reversed previous cuts and invested in capacity and services.

The work undertaken to establish a three-year budget gives leaders in children’s services financial certainty and the ability to make the investments in services required

to support improvement and, most importantly, to deliver better outcomes for children and young people in Bradford.

Elected members from all parties have been appropriately concerned about outcomes for children and young people. There is cross party support for children's services and there is no indication of political interference in the delivery of services or that elected members have used children's services as a 'political football'.

Despite the clear commitment of council leaders and elected members, improvement in Children Services in Bradford has been too slow. The fact that council leaders had to respond to the pandemic, had a significant impact, but more should have been done to drive improvement.

6. Partnerships

Partnership planning

The Children and Young People's Plan ([Interim Children and Young People's Plan 2021-22 | Bradford Council](#)) is an interim plan for 2021/22. It sets out six strategic aims, four of which are the same as priorities in the Council Plan providing a strong read across between the plans:

- Good Start and Great Schools
- Better Health, Better Lives
- Better Skills, More Good Jobs and a Growing Economy
- Safe, Sustainable and Active Communities
- Safeguarding the Most vulnerable and Supporting Families
- Participation and voice

The Children and Young People's Plan has a 'plan on a page' for each of the strategic aims. This covers its ambition for children, the priorities, the actions that will be taken and how success will be measured, again mirroring the Council Plan.

The plan also identifies that five underpinning principles that run through the plan.

- The voice of the child
- Prevention and early intervention
- A whole family approach
- Inclusion and equality
- Partnership working and collaboration

The plan is clear, ambitious, child focused and informed by what children and young people have said that they want. However, the plan is not endorsed by senior leaders in the Council or partner agencies.

Safeguarding partnership

The Bradford Safeguarding Partnership ([Safer Bradford - Children](#)) has a Strategic Leadership Group that consists of the Independent Chair and Scrutineer, the Child Executive, Bradford and District Borough Council, the Divisional Commander for Bradford District, West Yorkshire Police and the Chief Officer, Bradford District &

Craven Clinical Commissioning Groups. This group sets the strategic direction for the partnership, ensures effective arrangements are in place, agrees funding and resolves disagreements and escalations.

The Strategic Leadership Group is supported to take forward its key priorities and objectives by the wider 'Bradford Partnership', which has representation from agencies working with children and young people in the Bradford area, including the third sector partners.

The Bradford Partnership has four sub-groups that take forward specific areas of work on behalf of the partnership. They are:

- Learning and Improvement
- Performance, Audit, Evaluation and Compliance
- Policy and Procedure Child
- Safeguarding Practice Review Steering

The Safeguarding Partnership produces an annual report on its priorities and progress. ([Bradford Safeguarding Adults Board \(BSAB\) \(saferbradford.co.uk\)](https://www.saferbradford.co.uk)). The annual report is presented to the Council and to the Improvement Board.

The Safeguarding Partnership is identified as a strength in some of the reports. The Independent Chair and Scrutineer has worked closely with the Improvement Advisor to support improvement. For example, the Safeguarding Partnership has supported the restructuring of the Integrated Front Door and development and implementation of revised threshold criteria to improve the quality of referrals.

The Partnership played an important role during the pandemic in ensuring that agencies were focussed on the most vulnerable children.

The Safeguarding Partnership has also ensured that there is a strong and coordinated approach to the issue of child sexual exploitation in Bradford. Following a high-profile court case in 2019 which resulted in nine men being sentenced to a total of 132 years' and 8 months' imprisonment the Partnership commissioned a serious case review led by an independent expert.

The review considered historical and more recent cases. It concluded that there had been substantial improvements in practice since the 2000's but there were also lessons to be learnt from the more recent cases. The issue of child sexual exploitation is, sadly, not unique to Bradford, and there is valuable learning for other authorities across the country from the Bradford serious case review. ([Child Sexual Exploitation Thematic Review \(saferbradford.co.uk\)](https://www.saferbradford.co.uk)).

The report was accepted by members of the Bradford Safeguarding Partnership which ensured that action was taken to strengthen the response to child sexual exploitation. This included:

- Developing a Specialist Exploitation Hub to enhance existing practice and processes. These include a daily multi-agency risk assessment meeting (DRAM), which reviews new and existing cases known to agencies where there

is evidence of exploitation. Exploitation and missing strategies are put in place with agreed points of review to mitigate the risk of harm.

- Commissioning specialist training on exploitation in response to the learning identified in the review. This was in addition to existing training on child sexual exploitation provided by the Partnership.

Health

Issues in relation to the health provision for children were highlighted by an inspection of health services for children looked after and safeguarding in Bradford conducted in February 2019 but not published until June (20190603_cfas_bradford_final_report.pdf (cqc.org.uk)). The review considered the work of Airedale Foundation Trust, Bradford Teaching Hospitals Trust, Bradford District Care Foundation Trust, Locala, Change Grow Live and the Bridge Project. It also reviewed the three District Clinical Commissioning Groups, Airedale, Wharfedale and Craven, Bradford City and Bradford District.

Whilst the report recognised that there were many strengths within the collective health services across all the agencies involved, services were not meeting their statutory requirements for looked after children. Issues were also identified in relation to health visiting, CAMHS and services to some children with special educational needs and disabilities. The report made a total of 59 recommendations.

In November 2019, the Centre for Mental Health was commissioned by Bradford Council, Bradford District Care Foundation Trust and the District Clinical Commissioning Groups to conduct a system-wide review of mental health services for children and young people across Bradford District and Craven. The review included services provided across the voluntary sector, schools, local authority as well as the NHS.

The system wide review was published in July 2020 ([Item-11.1-BradfordCraven-CYP-MH-Review-Executive-Summary.pdf](https://item-11.1-BradfordCraven-CYP-MH-Review-Executive-Summary.pdf) (bdct.nhs.uk)) and made findings and recommendations in relation to:

- Leadership, commissioning, and strategy
- Understanding the needs of children and young people: Data and insight
- Access and navigation
- Model of support

The review also identified that practitioners delivering mental health support had introduced some changes in the way they offer help in response to Covid and *‘Many of these adjustments have started to show promising and effective results that may continue after the lockdown ends’*.

The review findings led to *‘children and young people’s wellbeing’* being identified as one of the priority programmes for *‘Act as One’*, the health and care partnership for Bradford District and Craven.

A multi-agency leadership team was agreed to take forward the *‘children and young people’s wellbeing’* programme. Additional funding, both one off and recurrent, has

been provided for children looked after nursing, CAMHS and services for children with special educational needs and disabilities to reduce backlogs and improve services.

Schools

There are 216 schools in Bradford: 34 secondary, 11 special schools and alternative provision and 171 primary schools. 46% of schools are maintained, predominantly at primary level. Whilst I did not visit schools and meet with a representative group of Head Teachers from across the authority due to the pandemic, I was able to speak to a small number of Heads and received a number of written submissions from Head Teachers. I was informed of some positive examples of where schools and the local authority had worked well together to support children and young people during the pandemic. School leaders were anxious to work with partners in social care but reported that this had been difficult because of the frequent changes at leadership and practice levels within the local authority. Communication about changes in staffing and structure and in relation to early help, for example, had not always been clear.

Police

Joint working with West Yorkshire Police has been impacted by frequent changes in the Divisional Commander. There have been five changes in the three years since 2018. Whilst this has led to some issues in relation to the development of an agreed approach in some areas, for example contacts and referrals, there is evidence of good collaborative working at operational level particularly in relation to domestic violence and children at risk of exploitation where additional resources have been deployed by both the police and local authority.

Analysis

Improvement since 2018 in Bradford has been hindered by weak local strategic partnerships and a lack of a shared vision and plan.

There is no clear, agreed partnership vision that is owned by all partners and which is driven by leaders at a strategic level and delivered by practitioners working together on the ground. This has been a major gap and has impacted on the ability of partners to work together to deliver better outcomes for children in Bradford. The Children and Young People's Plan could provide this framework but it is not endorsed by senior leaders in the Council or partner agencies. None of the senior leaders that I spoke to from partner agencies made any reference to the Children and Young People's Plan. It does not appear to underpin or drive partnership working. This is a missed opportunity.

Relationships between the local authority and some partners, particularly in Health agencies, have been strained and there is a need to reset these as a matter of urgency. Some partners reported that they had found it difficult to engage with the local authority because of the authority's focus on internal improvement work, which they believed limited their contribution. Some partners reported that they found it difficult to engage with senior leaders in the local authority. Some partners reported that they experienced leaders in the local authority as defensive and overly challenging of partners. However, senior leaders in the local authority have expressed a view that partners have been too slow to appreciate the issues facing children's services and in

taking action to address issues within their agency that would support and have helped to improve outcomes for children.

The social and economic context of Bradford means that many children and young people in the city will require support if they are to achieve good outcomes. This cannot be done by any single agency. It requires agencies to work together at both an individual and strategic level to ensure that children and young people have access to a range of high-quality support and services. It is evident that this level of partnership has not been in place for a number of years.

The need for improved partnership working was recognised by the senior leaders of all agencies. There was a strong commitment from partners to reset relationships and work together to improve services and outcomes for children and families in Bradford.

Re-building relationships between partners and establishing a partnership vision that is ambitious and which drives partnership working to deliver good outcomes for all children should be a priority for the leaders of all agencies in Bradford. Work to address the relationship between health partners and the local authority has commenced recently. An external facilitator has been engaged and is working with the agencies to build a stronger working relationship and a shared focus.

7. Leadership Arrangements for Children's Services

The Director of Children's Services in Bradford covers both social care and education.

There is a Deputy Director for Education and Learning covering school improvement, education safeguarding, school data, capital, sufficiency, school admissions, SEND, Inclusion, Transport & the Virtual School supported by 9 heads of service.

There is a Deputy Director for Children's Social Care, who provides leadership to fieldwork social work services, the Integrated Front Door and Early Help and Prevention. The Deputy Director manages six Heads of Service.

In addition to the Deputy Directors Bradford has an Assistant Director Safeguarding, Commissioning and Provider Services who reports to the Director of Children's Services. The post is responsible for the management of fostering services, the authority's eleven children's homes, the Strategic Commissioning Manager and the Head of Service for Safeguarding Reviewing and Quality Assurance.

Children's Services Leadership since the 2018 Ofsted inspection

Following the publication of the Ofsted inspection on 29 October 2018 the Director of Children's Services and local authority agreed that he would step down in November, although he did not formally leave the authority until February 2019.

The Deputy Director for Education was appointed in October 2018. She joined the Council from a smaller authority in the region where she had occupied a similar role. The Deputy Director is supported by two experienced Assistant Directors.

Bradford appointed an experienced interim Director of Children's Services and interim Deputy Director for Children's Social Care in November 2018, both of whom had led

improvement work in other authorities. Much of the initial focus was on immediate actions to address the areas of weakness identified in the inspection.

The interim Director of Children's Services left in June 2019 and the permanent Director started the following month. This was the new Director's first post as Director of Children's Services. He had considerable experience of children's social care and had led improvement in his previous role as Chief Operating Officer in a children's services trust.

In November 2019 Bradford was successful in appointing an experienced permanent Deputy Director for Children's Social Care at the second attempt. The new Deputy Director had joined from another large metropolitan authority where he had been one of several Assistant Directors. He had previously been the Deputy Director in a smaller city in Wales. The role of Assistant Director Safeguarding, Commissioning and Provider Services was filled by seconding a Head of Service from fieldwork into the role in May 2020. All the Heads of Service posts in children's services were not filled until March 2020.

When Ofsted raised issues regarding services for children looked after in July 2021 the Assistant Director was on sickness leave and subsequently resigned the following month. The Chief Executive and Director of Children's Services discussed the September Monitoring Visit report in their regular one to one. Shortly after, the DCS resigned in October 2021. The Deputy Director for Children's Social Care left the authority in November 2021.

The post of Director of Children's Services is currently covered by the Deputy Director for Education who has acted up into the role since November. Her substantive role is covered by two Assistant Directors, one who has responsibility for school improvement, education safeguarding, school data and Capital and Admission functions and the other Assistant Director has responsibility for SEND, inclusion and Transport functions.

Since November 2021, the role of Deputy Director for Children's Social Care has been filled, on an interim basis, by a senior leader with experience of service improvement at both director and deputy director levels. He had been previously covering the role of Assistant Director, Safeguarding, Commissioning and Provider Services so the change provided some continuity, although he had only been with the authority for less than two months.

The authority immediately recruited an experienced senior leader who has led improvement in several authorities to cover the role of Assistant Director. He came into post in November.

Analysis

Whilst Bradford have moved swiftly to change leaders where problems have occurred, the city, like others in their position, have struggled to secure a permanent, high quality, experienced team to lead improvement.

A change of senior leadership in children's services is not unusual following a poor inspection. Nor is it unusual for interim leaders to be used until a permanent

appointment can be made. The local authority appears to have acted promptly following the resignation of the Director and a period of six months from a resignation to having a new Director in post is not unreasonable.

The authority did not have a high number of applicants for the role of Director and had to go out to recruitment twice for the post of Deputy Director for Children's Social Care. Whilst there is a high turnover of senior roles in children's services nationally, the difficulty experienced in recruiting to senior leadership posts in Bradford reflects the challenge faced by many authorities who have been judged as inadequate. In addition, Bradford is a large and complex authority.

As the new Director had been the Chief Operating Officer in a Trust he had not operated recently as a senior leader within a political and corporate context. Bradford was not only a much larger and complex local authority: children's services were experiencing significant challenges. On his appointment the regional ADCS allocated an experienced director as a mentor to the new Director. However, this was not used by him. The Chief Executive offered support for additional coaching, but the matching process to a coach was still ongoing at the time of the Director's departure. The Director did not use the Improvement Advisor, an experienced former Director of Children's services, proactively as a source of support and advice. This may have been because the Director felt that there was too much to do in the service. However, it appears to have left him isolated in a very pressured and challenging role.

In November 2019 Bradford was successful in appointing an experienced permanent deputy director for children's social care at the second attempt. The new Deputy Director for Children's Social Care had been a senior leader in large, complex metropolitan areas in the past, but this was the first time that he had been the substantive deputy director with sole responsibility for all children's social care in an authority as large and diverse as Bradford.

The Assistant Director, Safeguarding, Commissioning and Provider Services had been appointed as a Head of Service in the fieldwork service. He was asked to take on the role of Assistant Director by the Director who he had worked with previously. It was, therefore, his first time leading at this level and this range of services. He struggled in the role and it has been reported to me that the Assistant Director attempted to step down or resign on several occasions because of the pressure he was under but was persuaded to continue by the Director.

All the Heads of Service appointed were experienced middle managers: for seven of the eight it was their first time managing at Head of Service level.

This meant that from March 2020 all the leadership posts in Children's Social Care were filled by leaders who were in their first substantive post at a more senior level. This is not to question the competence, commitment or professionalism of these leaders. However, it meant that most leaders had no depth of experience in their new role and all had come into a more senior role under extremely challenging circumstances.

The lack of depth of senior leadership experience is, in my professional opinion, evidenced in some of the decisions made. (This is explored further in Section 8)

Children’s Social Care Services in Bradford are on their third senior leadership team in three years. Whilst some of these changes have not been in the control of the local authority it is unsettling for staff and impacts on the ability of children’s services to build effective working relationships with partners. Further, change is likely as a new permanent leadership team will have to be recruited.

8. Ofsted and Department for Education Assessment of Progress

Inspection Outcomes

Type of Inspection	Date Completed	Outcome
Inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers	March 2014	Children who need help and protection: <i>Requires Improvement</i> Children looked after and achieving permanence: <i>Good</i> Leadership, management and governance: <i>Good</i> Overall judgement: <i>Requires Improvement</i>
Joint targeted area inspection of the multi-agency response to abuse and neglect (JTAI)	March 2017	A letter was sent to senior leaders after the inspection outlining strengths and areas for improvement
Inspection of children’s social care services	Sept. 2018	The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: <i>Requires Improvement</i> The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: <i>Inadequate</i> The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: <i>Requires Improvement</i> Overall effectiveness: <i>Inadequate</i>

2014 Inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers

The 2014 Ofsted inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers identified a number of strengths. These included consistent leadership and high standards of practice in most service areas, a stable

and experienced workforce and manageable caseloads. However, inspectors noted a small but significant number of areas of weakness in practice with children in need of help and protection in relation to the strategy discussions and the timing of initial child protection conferences.

2017 Joint targeted area inspection of the multi-agency response to abuse and neglect (JTIA)

The joint targeted area inspection took place over a week between 27 February and 3 March 2017. It involved Ofsted, the Care Quality Commission, HMI Constabulary and HMI Probation. The inspection was part of a national thematic inspection of the multi-agency response to abuse and neglect and included a 'deep dive' focus on the response to children living with domestic abuse. The inspection findings were almost overwhelmingly positive with thirty-four key strengths identified. However, the inspectors also identified some practice issues, similar to those identified in the previous full inspection.

2018 Inspection of children's social care services

The children's services inspection in 2018 found that services for children in need of help and protection in Bradford were 'Inadequate'. The service had serious failures which left children at risk of significant harm. Children in need of protection were not being consistently identified and were not being provided with the right help at the right time to meet their needs. Arrangements in the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub were ineffective and resulted in children being left in potentially harmful situations.

The vulnerability of some specific groups of children was not always recognised or appropriately responded to. The impact of ongoing neglect or domestic abuse is not always recognised. It should be noted that these issues were the focus of the JTIA the previous year.

Although strategy meetings took place in a timely manner, safety planning was poor whilst safeguarding enquiries were taking place and there were delays in holding initial child protection conferences, which left children at risk. Arrangements for many children experiencing neglect were inappropriate. The local authority had heavily invested in the '*Signs of Safety*' practice model and over 2000 practitioners across the partnership had received training. However, despite this, social work practice across locality teams varied in both quality and impact.

Inspectors noted that children in care and care leavers were not receiving consistently good help to promote their well-being and to improve their outcomes. However, most children in care benefited from the support of social workers. This was particularly the case in the 'throughcare teams', which worked with children once a permanence plan was in place. In the 'throughcare teams', social workers knew their children well and were focused on achieving positive outcomes for children. Inspectors judged these services to be 'Requires Improvement'.

An increase in demand for services at the same time as a significant number of experienced social workers and managers had left the authority were identified as the major contributory factors in the decline in services. Inspectors noted that additional funding and resource had been allocated and leaders had put plans in place to

address several areas for improvement. However, these were recent and it was too soon to say whether they would have an impact or whether any improvement would be sustained. The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families was judged to be 'Requires Improvement'

Inspectors concluded that services for children in Bradford had rapidly deteriorated since the Joint Targeted Area Inspection in April 2017. However, the main areas of failure in this inspection had been identified as weaknesses in previous inspections, and although the inspection framework had changed since the last full inspection, children's services had deteriorated in every domain since 2014.

As a result of the significant failings in services for children who need help and protection the authority received an overall judgement of 'Inadequate'.

2019

The local authority's progress was monitored through the Improvement Advisor, three Ofsted monitoring visits in March, June and October (the latter two of which were published) and two Department for Education Progress Reviews in May and December.

A number of common themes emerge from these evaluations. All reference that the local authority was or had developed a sound understanding of the scale of improvement required. This suggests that the failings in the service were more significant in both depth and scale than indicated in the 2018 inspection.

The local authority committed significant additional finance to support improvement including a re-investment in early help services, the re-grading of social worker salaries and increasing the social work establishment and a major restructuring of children's services. Agency staff had been recruited to maintain services and reduce caseloads while permanent staff were recruited.

It was noted that the arrival of the permanent Director and Deputy Director for Social Care, in November 2019, had brought greater stability and focus.

Whilst some progress was noted, particularly in relation to the 'front door', overall significant weakness remained in relation to practice, supervision and frontline management, data and quality assurance. Overall progress was felt to be too slow.

Reference is made to 'overly bureaucratic' corporate processes which were not responsive enough to the needs of the services.

All reports agreed that the main factor impacting on the authority's ability to improve was the significant number of social work vacancies across children's services.

2020

In 2020 the progress of improvement was evaluated by the Improvement Advisor, an Ofsted Monitoring Visit in February and a more comprehensive Focussed Visit in December. The Department for Education conducted a Progress review in July.

The reports highlighted that all the senior leadership positions in children's services were now filled with permanent staff. The authority had also been successful in

recruiting to middle management posts. However, it had been less successful in the recruitment and retention of qualified social workers. Social workers were leaving at the same, or at times higher rates, than they were joining. Consequently, children's services remained heavily dependent on agency staff to provide basic services. Additional resources had been secured to enable managed teams of agency staff to be brought in to increase capacity and provide greater stability.

A revised recruitment and retention strategy had been developed but concerns were expressed that this had taken too long to take through corporate governance processes.

There had been a wholesale restructuring of fieldwork services into a locality model. This was designed to reduce the number of changes of social workers, children and families experienced and improve partnership working at a local level. However, it was too soon to identify any improvements.

Practice standards had been introduced with training to support their implementation. These set clear expectations of staff in relation to key areas of practice including the frequency of visits to children subject to a child protection plan or looked after, care planning meetings for children in care and updating of assessments.

The improvement plan had been expanded with more focused allocation of project support.

There were significant delays for children entering care having their permanence plan agreed. The increased number of children becoming looked after resulted in significant issues with placement sufficiency resulting in too many children experiencing changes in placement.

There was progress in some areas; the earlier improvements at the Front Door and in relation to section 47 enquiries had been maintained and there was improved oversight of practice as a result of auditing, supervision and challenge by Independent Reviewing Officers and Child Protection Conference Chairs.

However, the rate of progress was slow and all the issues identified in the 2018 inspection had still not been addressed.

2021 January to June

In 2021 the progress of improvement was evaluated by the Improvement Advisor, Ofsted Monitoring Visits in April and September and a Department for Education Progress Review in March.

The reports identify progress in some areas of practice despite the impact of the pandemic. The Integrated Front Door continued to function well and the progress made in relation to strategy meetings and section 47s had been sustained. Performance management and quality assurance arrangements had continued to improve and the increased involvement of practitioners was proving more effective.

Funding had been provided to introduce managed teams of agency social workers to increase capacity by a further fifty practitioners. However, significant concerns remained about the recruitment and retention of permanent social workers and the

impact that the lack of stability had on the authority's ability to drive improvement and the experiences and outcomes that this had for individual children. Managed teams are an effective short-term solution to issues of capacity in the children's social work service. However, in the longer-term managed teams can have a negative impact if they are not well integrated with permanent staff.

Inspectors noted there was a high level of assessment activity and that this was in part due to the policy of updating assessments every six months. Inspectors noted that quality of assessments were variable.

The Ofsted Monitoring Visit in April provided a useful summary of progress to date:

'The improvement to date has transformed the basic infrastructure of the service, leading to an improved front door service, a revamped training programme, improved quality assurance and performance management, and significant financial investment to increase social work and managerial capacity. Caseloads for most social workers in the child and family service are steadily reducing. In addition, successful succession planning has enabled permanent social workers to progress in their careers, introducing increasing levels of experience and skill in the system. Both these developments are very new, although there is already some positive impact, which can be seen in some children's cases.'

However, both the Department for Education Review and the April Ofsted inspection expressed concerns about the pace and level of progress. In their letter to leaders following their review the Department for Education set out a number of areas where they expected to see progress noting, *'Your improvement journey since 2018 has been slow, so the next six months will be critical'*, whilst inspectors concluded in April that *'the progress on the quality of core social work practice has been too slow to show impact for children and families.'*

2021 July to December

On 7 July Ofsted wrote to the Director of Children's Services to express *'serious concern in relation to the safety, well-being and experiences of children in the care of Bradford Local Authority'*. These arose from a vulnerable looked after child being placed in an unregulated placement without appropriate checks having been undertaken to ensure that the placement was safe and appropriate to the child's needs. Serious concerns had also been identified in relation to two children's homes run by the authority which were judged to be *'inadequate'*. In the case of one of the homes the inspectorate was so concerned that the home's registration was suspended.

The issues highlighted *'very serious concerns in relation to core social work practice, front line management decision-making and oversight at all levels within the organisation. This includes concerns in respect of the local authority as an active corporate parent'*. Consequently, the letter was copied to the Department for Education and led the Secretary of State for Education to issue a Statutory Direction and appoint an independent Commissioner.

The Children's Services Leadership Team pulled together a comprehensive action plan to address these issues and the Chief Executive established a weekly meeting to monitor progress across children's services and to expedite actions.

The Ofsted Monitoring Visit in September identified significant weaknesses in services and practice with children looked after and expressed concerns about the lack of concrete improvements to children's experiences. It highlighted the need to:

- urgently improve the standard of care provided in residential services
- improve the quality and effectiveness of commissioning of placements
- strengthen the effectiveness of corporate parenting
- improve the consistency of practice in care planning and managers' oversight and practice with children living at home under the jurisdiction of the court
- further stabilise the workforce and to reduce social workers' workloads; and
- strengthen the participation and the voice and influence of children and young people in helping to make improvements to the service.

Inspectors noted some areas of improvement and again commented on the commitment of staff in children's services.

The Director of Children's Services left shortly after the publication of the Monitoring Visit letter.

The Deputy Director for Education was asked to act up into the Director's role. It was felt that this would provide greater continuity than engaging another Interim Director. From her background working with children with disabilities the Acting Director has some understanding of the wider issues of Children's Social Care. However, she is aware of the limitations of her knowledge and experience and the authority has engaged a very experienced former Director of Children's Services to act as a mentor.

The Acting Director has developed a positive relationship with the Interim Deputy and Assistant Directors, and they work well as a team. They have a good understanding of the challenges. They along with corporate colleagues have simplified the Improvement Plan and there is a sense of grip and purpose in their approach. Practice standards are being revised in line with statutory requirements and processes are being simplified. The Leadership Team have begun to rebuild relationships with stakeholders, including the corporate centre, and have used me in my role as Commissioner appropriately to support them to take forward improvement.

During the period of my review a trial into the tragic death of a sixteen-month-old child, Star Hobson, who died on 22 September 2020, took place. At its conclusion Star's mother, Frankie Smith, was sentenced to eight years for causing or allowing her death. Star's mother's partner, Savannah Brockhill, was jailed for a minimum of 25 years for murder. Their case will be examined under the unduly lenient sentence scheme.

The Bradford Safeguarding partnership had commissioned a Local Safeguarding Practice Review into Star's death. The local Bradford partnership and the National Panel have recently agreed that Star Hobson's review should be carried out by the National Panel. The national review will therefore be a review into both Arthur Labinjo-Hughes' and Star Hobson's deaths. This will help ensure that alongside local-specific

recommendations, there is a high-quality and coherent set of recommendations for central government so that we can better protect children in the future.

I am confident that the National Panel’s review will be robust, vigorous and thorough.

9. Improvement Activity following the 2018 Inspection

After the Department of Education issued an Improvement Notice, it appointed an Improvement Advisor for Bradford. The Advisor is a very experienced former director of children’s services who has supported improvement in that role but also as an improvement advisor in other authorities. The Improvement Advisor has chaired the Improvement Board. The Board meets monthly, other than during holiday periods. It is well attended by key partners and membership has been at an appropriately senior level to support strategic decisions. The Improvement Advisor has provided support and challenge to the local authority. The Improvement Advisor has had a particular focus on ensuring that the seven enablers for improvement were in place:



The Improvement Advisor was successful in supporting the local authority to get three of the enablers, ‘strategic approach’, ‘building the supporting apparatus’ and ‘engaging partners’ fully established. The latter of these was important as some partners have been struggling to meet their statutory obligations to children. Although he was unable to secure a wider partnership vision for children partners the Improvement Advisor has engaged with partners and held them to account for their role in supporting the delivery of better outcomes for children. The Improvement Advisor played a key role in supporting the development and use of performance information, including auditing, within children’s services through the development of the Vital Signs report.

Following his appointment in 2019 the new Director of Children's Services assessed that the scale and depth of weaknesses in children's services in Bradford was greater than suggested in the 2018 inspection.

The Director took a systematic approach to improvement. This was essential given the scale of the change required. He obtained funding to engage an experienced Project Director, who had worked with the Director previously, to manage a team of fourteen project coordinators. The improvement plan was developed and expanded to eighty-two-pages. This was implemented through a number of work streams, each of which was coordinated by a project coordinator.

The Director and Deputy Director for Children's Social Care initiated a major restructuring of field work services in children's services. This was supported by a review of social work capacity and agreement was obtained to increase the social work establishment by over one hundred posts to deal with the increase in demand, reduce caseloads and improve practice. Funding was also obtained to expand Early Help Services that had been cut in 2015-16.

The Assistant Director post was revised to provide greater oversight of fostering and residential services and enable the Deputy Director for Social Care to focus on fieldwork services, which had significant weaknesses.

The Children's Social Work Service was re-organised into a locality structure in 2020 based around four localities. Each locality had a Head of Service managing two service managers. The main purpose of the re-organisation was to reduce the number of changes of social worker experienced by children and families and to improve partnership working. It was decided to include the 'Through Care' and Care Leavers Service, which had previously been organised on an authority-wide basis, in the new locality structure. This would enable the Head of Service to have an oversight of a child's journey from assessment to care leaver. Initially, a separate assessment function was retained but this was subsequently integrated into the localities. However, the flow of work soon became too much for the locality teams and assessment teams were re-established.

There was a necessary focus on performance management and quality assurance as arrangements were weak, and in some places non-existent. A Head of Service for Safeguarding Reviewing and Quality Assurance post was established and an experienced leader, with a sound understanding of practice, was recruited from CAFCASS. She subsequently developed the structure, recruited the team and worked with colleagues to strengthen arrangements.

Bradford had previously invested in the 'Signs of Safety' practice model. It was decided to continue with this approach and training and development opportunities were designed to support practitioners to practice in accordance with the practice model.

Practice processes were reviewed and re-established and management oversight strengthened at key points. Practice standards were created. These set out the expectations of practitioners. Clear expectations were set out covering the frequency of visiting and care planning meetings for looked after children, visiting and core group meetings for children subject to a child protection plan, and requirements for

assessment and re-assessment of children's needs and circumstances on all open cases.

A common theme in reports on progress was the lack of support from the corporate centre. Recruitment and IT were common themes in many reports. It is clear from my discussions with former leaders in children's services and current leaders in the wider council that everyone was committed to improving outcomes for children and young people in Bradford. However, as the department was in crisis, despite regular strategic meetings between the service and the corporate centre, the scale and complexity of change required impacted on the ability to respond quickly. For example, it was not clear to leaders in children's services or colleagues in finance and human resources what the actual staffing establishment was in children's services. This was a result of changes and decisions made by various individuals in the past. These had not always been shared. Consequently, this impacted on the ability of leaders in children's services to make decisions on service capacity and structure.

Children's services reported delays in getting the revised recruitment and retention offer out as it had to go through council processes. From a corporate perspective this was part of a wider strategy that would involve creating substantial numbers of new social work posts, as well as improving social work pay and conditions, an investment of millions of pounds that had to be agreed by full council.

Recruitment of social workers into vacancies in teams was reported to have put a significant strain on team managers who were expected to complete a range of administrative tasks to get new social workers on the establishment and into post. The view of the service was that team managers needed to be focused on practice and these tasks should have been completed by colleagues in Human Resources. However, given the high rate of turnover in children's services and subsequent restructuring and creation of additional posts, the corporate centre was struggling to keep track of post numbers and vacancies. As team managers had the smallest span of control, the corporate centre sought to use them to bring some order back into the system and ensure that social workers were on the establishment, in the right place and could be paid. However, team managers were struggling to provide support to practitioners and oversight of practice and to ensure that cases were allocated as staff left and joined the team.

There is a similar narrative regarding IT. There were issues about the quality of equipment for social workers, as at some point someone had decided to disable the cameras on computers, limiting their suitability for remote working. In response, the local authority invested in new IT equipment. Social Workers were asked to come into a central point to collect new equipment, but many struggled with this due to the other pressures on them. Laptops were then sent out to the areas. However, it is not clear whether all teams knew about this or how to access the equipment as I was informed that the corporate centre subsequently collected 150 laptops that had never been used. There were also problems with the Council's IT infrastructure. Servers were operating at capacity and the Council's Microsoft licence was out of date and no longer supported. Whilst these issues were being addressed it meant that systems were slow and liable to crash. This created issues for practitioners in children's services, required

to complete long and complex assessments and reports, as they lost work when the system went down. There were also problems following lockdown as the authority did not immediately have arrangements in place for wholesale video conferencing. Whilst this this was a challenge for all services it was particularly frustrating for children's services who required these facilities for supervision, meetings, and conferences. Children's services were given priority but the roll-out took time.

Problems with IT were further exacerbated for social workers by issues with the local authority's social care recording system. In common with many social work recording systems, Bradford uses a workflow system, where a task must be completed before another can be started. However, because of modifications made historically to the system by the service and the addition of new processes and accompanying forms that were not part of the workflow, some information already contained in the system were not always automatically pulled through. Consequently, social workers reported that they had to complete forms from scratch or 'cut and paste' from other parts of the system. It should be noted that these issues were not the result of actions taken by the corporate centre but within the Service. However, given the complexity of the changes required it took time to allocate the appropriate resource to move this forward and this was the responsibility of the corporate centre.

The Strategic Director for Corporate Resources was freed up to support children's services and spent time in the service supporting senior leaders and attended the Divisional Leadership Meetings. This helped to improve relationships at a strategic level and to make the corporate centre more responsive. A HR consultant was engaged as additional capacity to support the service to develop its recruitment and retention strategy. This added capacity and value. A project team with a dedicated IT lead was established to address the issues with the children's services social care recording system. This has made significant progress over the last six months. These are positive examples of joint working between the corporate centre and Children's Service and where the corporate centre has been able to add value and support improvement.

However, there is still a considerable way to go. Recently, for example, it was agreed as part of the recruitment and retention of social workers that they would have free car parking and that their professional fees would be paid. Given the scale of the challenges facing children's services in relation to recruitment and the cost of agency staff, this is a small investment. However, access to free car parking was delayed as there were concerns about the implications for other staff in the authority. All social work staff had free parking through the peak of the pandemic and have now had free parking reinstated by the Chief Executive pending a formal permanent arrangement.

Analysis

Improvement work since 2018 has been hindered by a range of factors: a failure to fully exploit the experience of the Improvement Adviser; an overly complex and process focused approach to planning; and weaknesses in coordinating change with corporate services. This has been further hindered by the pandemic and sharply rising demand for services.

The Improvement Advisor was not, in my opinion, used to their full extent by the leadership team in children's services. Had they done so he could, I believe, have supported them to develop a better interface with the corporate centre.

A systematic approach to improvement was required and the pressure on leaders and managers in children's services meant that additional capacity was required to support them to take forward improvement. However, the project management approach developed was, in my opinion, too complex and did not drive improvement. The improvement plan was too large and led to a focus on tracking actions rather than on supporting improvement. It also meant that most of the improvement capacity for the service was being taken up by the programme team.

Leaders in the Service reported that many of the project coordinators did not have an in-depth understanding of children's services and, as a result, were able to offer little practical support. For example, despite the size of the project team there was no-one able to assist the Deputy Director for Social Care to write the children's services self-assessment. The role of project coordinators was experienced by many of the managers in Children's Services as 'monitoring' and 'progress chasing' rather than supporting and enabling. There was a feeling from some managers and staff that delivery of the plan rather than improvement became the focus.

The programme and project approach also appear to have resulted in some areas of work becoming compartmentalised and connections that would have helped improvement overall were not made.

My assessment is that, despite the structured approach to improvement, the leadership in children's services in Bradford has been reactive over the past three years. In part this has undoubtedly been a result of trying to take forward a major programme of improvement during a pandemic. However, in my opinion it is also a consequence of the lack of a depth of experience within the leadership team which meant that pragmatic decisions were not always made and at times the desire for excellence got in the way of delivering good enough.

The number of cases open to children's services has increased from 3,870 to 6,150 since the inspection in 2018. This is a thirty-eight percent increase (Tables 2 to 5, final column). The children's services response to the increase in demand has been to increase capacity through the introduction of agency teams to keep caseloads manageable and to re-evaluate the permanent social work establishment. Whilst the pandemic and increasing numbers of children in poverty will account for much of the increase, I have not seen any evidence of analysis or of a strategic plan to address the issue either by children's services or jointly with partners.

The decision to include the through care and care leavers teams in the locality structure and the approach taken to performance standards are examples of where, in my view, a more pragmatic approach could have been used. This decision meant that, although the locality Heads of Service have a small number of direct reports, they have a large span of practice. It also means social workers in looked after teams, who had previously worked with adolescents, work with younger children and vice versa. This has resulted in some workers feeling exposed and that they cannot use their skills

and experience with specific age groups to capacity. Another consequence of the decision is that looked after teams in each locality have had to put duty arrangements in place. Previously, duty arrangements had covered the whole service. This put added pressure on practitioners and limited the time available for face-to-face work with children. The changes also impacted on the Care Leavers Service. It meant that some workers who had been experts in particular areas of practice, such as accommodation and further education, did not have the capacity for this approach and some left the service.

The clarity offered by the performance standards was welcomed by social workers; they set clear expectations and the performance of individuals and teams was measured against the standards and reported on. However, many of the standards exceeded statutory and regulatory requirements. This approach was taken by the Children's Leadership team to address historical inadequacies and ensure that children were being safeguarded. However, it meant that in many cases social workers were undertaking visits and arranging meetings more frequently than necessary; for example, visiting looked after children every four weeks and holding a care planning meeting every six weeks, irrespective of the length and stability of the child's placement. This placed practitioners under increased pressure and resulted in a focus on process rather than practice which impacted on the quality of assessment and on recruitment and retention. Some experienced practitioners that I spoke to were clear that it undermined their professional autonomy and ability to make decisions based on the needs and circumstances of individual children.

I think it is important to stress this is no criticism of individual managers, many of whom have gone above and beyond what could reasonably be expected, to do their best for children and young people in the most challenging of circumstances.

I have found the narrative around the corporate centre difficult to understand. The 2018 Ofsted Report and subsequent monitoring visit reference the prompt action taken to secure the additional resources required by children's services. This has included recurrent funding to recruit additional social work practitioners, early help and business support staff, project management support, as well as significant one-off funding for agency staff, consultants and placements.

From my discussions across the services, the issue appears to be not that children's services were unsupported by the corporate centre, but that they experienced difficulties in accessing support in a timely way. This led to a belief by some managers and staff in children's services that, whilst not being deliberately obstructive, the corporate centre did not understand the pressure that staff and managers in the service were under. From the perspective of the corporate centre, there was a sense of frustration; they were working to provide children's services with what had been asked for but then found that the specification was not correct; it had not been provided in the right way, at the right time or in the right location; and, when provided, resources appeared to have little impact on caseloads or practice.

Many of the tensions can, I think, be explained as 'issues of translation'. For their part, children's services felt that they were clear about the support that they needed and it was down to the corporate centre to provide it. However, the corporate centre did not

fully understand the pressures on managers in children's services and had insufficient knowledge of the detail of practice and processes to know how best to provide the support required and this was not provided or driven by the Senior Leadership Team. There was no wider strategic review to look at how corporate processes and arrangements could be changed to best support children's services. At the same time most of the team supporting improvement were focused on project coordination.

Attempts were made to address this and the involvement of the Strategic Director for Corporate Resources, in working alongside the Children's Leadership Team, has been helpful.

The Chief Executive's weekly meeting could have done more to address this but very quickly, because of concerns about performance, it became too focused on assurance and monitoring. Over the last three months this has improved and there is now more of a sense of a team around children's services.

Impact and Response to COVID-19

Two of the three years of Bradford's improvement journey have taken place during the pandemic and this has impacted on the authority's ability to make progress. Bradford had one of the highest rates of infection in the country and remained subject to either local or national restrictions throughout the first wave of the pandemic.

The response to COVID-19 by children's services and partner agencies was prompt, child-focused and innovative with the needs of the most vulnerable children being prioritised. There were good examples of collaborative working and strengthened relationships and practice across agencies.

However, the pandemic did expose and exacerbate some of the challenges the authority faced, taking forward improvements. Recruitment became even more challenging as did delivering the training and development offer for staff. The council's IT infrastructure was not initially equipped to enable wholesale video conferencing or to cope with most staff working from home. Whilst children's services were given priority, for the roll out of new equipment and access to video conferencing, initial issues with access and then reliability was a source of frustration for staff and leaders for much of the year.

Contacts and referrals, which has been reducing following the introduction of the new multi-agency 'Continuum of Need,' increased, with a significant spike when schools returned in September. Whilst this increase in demand was not unique to Bradford it did put additional pressure on a service which was already under pressure. Additional resource was agreed to cope with the increase and to maintain the improvements at the 'Front Door'.

The high levels of poverty and deprivation in Bradford meant that the local authority was more affected by the impact of COVID-19 than most other councils. It placed additional pressures on leaders at a time when improvement needed to be driven. However, although the pandemic did undoubtedly impact on the authority's ability to drive some changes, even taking this into account, the pace of progress has been too slow

10. Workforce

The stability of the social care workforce was identified as an issue that had had a significant impact on practice in the 2018 inspection. At the time of the inspection, it was reported that the number of vacancies had reduced from 38 to 5. However, most of these vacancies had arisen through experienced practitioners leaving the authority and most of their replacements were newly qualified.

Following the inspection, in common with many authorities who receive an inadequate Ofsted judgement, the authority lost more experienced social workers and has struggled to replace them. Tables 2 to 5 provide an overview of vacancies, agency usage and average caseloads, when this became available

2018	Social Work Posts on Structure*	Social Work Employees*	Agency Social Workers*	Average Caseloads	Total open cases
31/08/2018	318	280	47		3870
30/09/2018	328	292	52		4063
31/10/2018	330	296	61		4204
30/11/2018	317	297	64		4313
31/12/2018	317	295	63		4366

Table 2: 2018 data

2019	Social Work Posts on Structure*	Social Work Employees*	Agency Social Workers*	Average caseloads	Total open cases
31/01/2019	323	299	65		4747
28/02/2019	324	302	69		5013
31/03/2019	326	303	78		5456
30/04/2019	349	299	81		5640
31/05/2019	347	295	84		5409
30/06/2019	348	288	93		5465
31/07/2019	344	278	86		5274
31/08/2019	351	281	104	18.4	5199
30/09/2019	351	279	90	19.0	5213
31/10/2019	354	274	90	20.0	5466
30/11/2019	354	274	110	19.8	5588
31/12/2019	352	272	103	20.2	5583

Table 3: 2019 data

2020	Social Work Posts on Structure*	Social Work Employees*	Agency Social Workers*	Average caseloads	Total open cases
31/01/2020	351	265	136	20.1	5725
29/02/2020	351	264	143	19.9	5756
31/03/2020	354	259	138	19.8	5376
30/04/2020	354	257	137	19.4	5132
31/05/2020	360	261	127	19.0	5068
30/06/2020	361	266	141	19.2	5163
31/07/2020	365	268	139	20.0	5403
31/08/2020	372	269	155	20.5	5483
30/09/2020	381	275	159	20.3	5732
31/10/2020	383	278	136	20.4	5909
30/11/2020	385	274	139	20.0	6055
31/12/2020	376	276	159	20.2	6165

Table 4: 2020 data

2021	Social Work Posts on Structure*	Social Work Employees*	Agency Social Workers*	Average caseloads	Total open cases
31/01/2021	403	274	144	20.1	6349
28/02/2021	396	276	140	20.6	6410
31/03/2021	402	272	154	20.0	6357
30/04/2021	424	271	153	19.9	6177
31/05/2021	425	269	136	19.8	6207
30/06/2021	424	276	149.6	19.7	6141
31/07/2021	424	277	154.6	19.3	6111
31/08/2021	427	283	183.3	18.5	5733
30/09/2021	428	278	180.6	17.6	5667
31/10/2021	435	280	217.6	18.2	5885
30/11/2021	443	276	216.6	19.4	6150

Table 5: 2021 data

*Posts include social workers, team and services managers, auditors, conference chairs, reviewing officers and Heads of Service.

The need to stabilise the workforce is an issue in every report since the 2018 inspection. Data on workforce is included in the Vital Signs report and is monitored through the Improvement Board.

The impact of a lack of stability on practice and children is well summarised in the April 2021 Monitoring Visit:

'Many assessments (both on new referrals and on open children's cases) are taking too long for children. This means that children's circumstances or the risks that they are exposed to are not swiftly identified or responded to in order to manage risk.

'Much of this delay is attributable to the numerous changes of social worker and team manager on children's cases. This has had a very real impact: delaying the progression of children's cases; making children subject to statutory services for too long; children's needs not being assessed and identified, and risk not being reduced quickly enough. Social workers told inspectors that it has also impacted on children and families being able to trust in their worker and has hindered meaningful relational social work practice'.

Views of staff

Ofsted and other reports over the years have referenced the hard work and commitment of children's services staff in Bradford. This was my experience of the staff that I met from across the service.

Discussion with staff highlighted a number of themes:

- Many staff felt they had not been involved in decisions about the development of the service and that there was a culture of 'doing to' rather than 'working with'
- There has been a focus on process at the cost of practice. Staff reported that many processes duplicated others leading to inconsistencies and repetition
- Some of the changes introduced did not make sense to staff and limited their opportunity to exercise their professional judgement
- Many staff reported that they felt they had been working in an environment of constant change
- There have been too many changes in leadership and management
- Staff turnover has continued to impact on caseloads, consistency in practice and most significantly on relationships with children
- IT was in issue both in terms of access to equipment but also in relation to functionality and workflows of the current social care system
- Newer staff felt that their induction had been poor
- Some staff were not clear what the Bradford approach and practice model are
- The lack of business support staff had been an issue and the re-introduction of these staff was welcomed but many staff felt that it had taken too long to get these staff in place.

It is important to note that in all my sessions with staff they also emphasised that there were a lot of positives about Bradford and that they were keen to support improvement and good outcomes for children.

The Independent Advisor has established a Staff Reference Group to ensure that the work of the Improvement Board takes account of the views of staff.

The Interim Director of Children's Services has initiated regular 'time to talk' sessions for staff. These have been well attended.

Analysis

Improvement has been significantly hindered by delays in resolving staffing issues in the social work and management. This has led to escalating costs and unnecessary changes and instability for children, families and teams.

The local authority has taken a number of actions on recruitment and retention. They engaged an external consultant to help them to develop their workforce development strategy. The local authority now has a competitive recruitment offer which includes a good starting salary, free car parking and payment of professional fees. Attention has been paid to providing staff with a proper induction and the internal processes for career progression have been simplified and linked to a development programme. Bradford have established links with the local university to support newly qualified social workers, who are also supported in their role by practice supervisors who provide support and mentoring. Work is now underway to formally establish a social work academy which will support all social workers with their professional development, including those moving into management positions. The local authority has recently developed a recruitment campaign and micro-site.

However, it has taken too long to put these arrangements in place. On the 19 December the local authority system recorded 124 social work vacancies. Data on agency social workers in post in November showed that there were 173.6 full time equivalent social workers in post. Despite the significant increase in structure there were fewer permanent social workers in post in Bradford at the end of November 2021 than at the time of the inspection in 2018.

11. Overall analysis and summary

In undertaking this review, I was required to bring together evidence to assess the council's capacity and capability to improve itself, in a reasonable timeframe, and recommend whether or not this evidence is sufficiently strong to suggest that long-term sustainable improvement to children's social care can be achieved, should operational service control continue to remain with the council.

This has been a complex task not just because of the complexity of Bradford but because it is three years since Bradford was judged to be inadequate by Ofsted.

Bradford is one of the largest, youngest and most diverse cities in England. Bradford is ranked as the thirteenth most deprived local authority in England and over a third of children are living below the poverty line. Bradford is, therefore, a challenging environment for children's social work.

The 2018 Ofsted inspection of children's services found significant failings in services for children who need help and protection, resulting in children's services being judged as inadequate. Previous inspections, in 2014 and 2017, had identified some areas of concern in relation to the Multi-Agency Front Door Service and safety planning for children prior to initial child protection case conferences being held. These issues appear to have been exacerbated by staff leaving the organisation and reductions in early help services.

A new leadership team was recruited for children's services, with the new Director coming into post in June 2019 and the Assistant Director in November of that year. They commenced a major re-organisation of children's services into a locality structure to improve relationships with partners, children and families. The new leadership structure in children's services was not filled until March 2020.

All of the senior leadership team in children's services were experienced and committed. However, for most it was their first time in a substantive role at a higher level of seniority and they had come into a more senior role under very challenging circumstances. Consequently, the approach to improvement in children's services was not underpinned by a significant depth of experience.

Leaders in children's services did take a systematic approach to improvement. There was a comprehensive improvement plan. This was supported by a project manager, supported by a large team of project coordinators. This resulted in a focus on the plan and process, rather than practice and impact. Most of the improvement capacity for the service being taken up by the project team. However, the project coordinators did not have an in-depth knowledge of children's social care. Therefore, they offered little practical help to managers in children's services, who reported that they felt monitored rather than supported

Whilst there is evidence that the Bradford Safeguarding Partnership is working well, overall partnership working in Bradford is not strong. There is no clear vision for children that is shared and owned by agencies working with children and young people in Bradford. The Interim Children and Young People's Plan is not endorsed by the senior leaders of the key agencies in Bradford. Consequently, agencies have not sufficiently prioritised children and young people. For example, it was not until a Care Quality Commission review of health services for children looked after and safeguarding in Bradford identified significant failings, that additional resource was provided for children looked after nursing, child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) and services for children with special educational needs and disabilities to reduce backlogs and improve services.

Relationships between the local authority and some partners have been strained. There is a desire and commitment to reset these relationships and this needs to be a priority going forward.

The reports of the Ofsted monitoring and focused visits, Department for Education reviews and the minutes of the Improvement Board all note progress but almost every report expresses concerns about the pace of progress and lack of impact on outcomes for children.

Following the inspection, council leadership quickly secured additional resources for children's services. This included funding for early help services, over a hundred social work posts and a programme manager and large project team to support the delivery of the improvement plan.

However, the reports also highlight issues between children's services and the corporate centre. It is clear there have been difficulties in articulating problems and solutions, and tensions arose as a result. Regular strategic meetings of the leadership teams were established to try and improve communication and increase the pace of progress. In addition, it was agreed to locate additional staff from Human Resources in children's services. However, these had limited impact initially as the corporate centre did not have sufficient understanding of the issues in children's services. At the same time whilst the Children's Leadership Team articulated the problems, they do not appear to have offered any solutions that enabled progress to be made at pace. Consequently, the corporate centre tried different approaches but none of them were what was needed. A number of focused meetings should have been arranged by senior leaders to understand the issues, their causes and consequences and identify and implement solutions.

A major impediment to improvement has been, and continues to be, the stability of the children's services workforce. The local authority engaged an external consultant to support the development of a comprehensive recruitment and retention offer. It is possibly one of the best in the country, but it has taken too long to put in place and is perhaps an example of where a more pragmatic approach may have given quicker results.

Senior leaders in the council were aware and concerned about the pace of improvement in children's services. However, council leaders report that the issues raised by Ofsted, in relation to children's homes and the placement of the young person in July 2021, came a shock to them. The Chief Executive established a weekly meeting to drive improvement but it became caught up in the detail of the improvement plan and too focused on monitoring.

The Director of Children's Services resigned in October 2021 and the Deputy Director for Children's Social Care left in November of that year. To provide some stability the Deputy Director for Education was asked to cover the role of Director on an interim basis. Two experienced interim senior leaders have been appointed to the posts of Deputy Director for Children's Social Care and Assistant Director, Safeguarding, Commissioning and Provider Services.

Whilst the new leadership team have come together quickly and appear to be working well together, three years following the 2018 Ofsted inspection, children's services in Bradford, does not have a permanent leadership team. Recruiting suitably experienced leaders will be a challenge for the authority, given other vacancies across the region.

There have been some positive, recent developments including a revised improvement plan, a review of practice and process to simplify these and align them with statutory requirements, improved relationships with the corporate centre and the

launch of the new recruitment and retention initiative. However, it is too soon to evaluate impact or whether they will be sustained.

It must be acknowledged that since early 2020 improvement in Bradford has been taking place within the context of a pandemic. Bradford had one of the highest rates of infection in the country and remained subject to either local or national restrictions throughout the first wave of the pandemic.

The pandemic has impacted on the authority's ability to drive some changes, for example recruitment. However, even taking the pandemic into account, the pace of progress has been too slow. Many of the key challenges identified in the 2018 inspection remain, particularly in relation to workforce stability and the quality of social work practice. After three years the local authority has been unable to create a context in which good social care practice can take place.

12. Conclusion

The Commissioner is asked to specifically "advise and report to the Minister on whether an alternative delivery and governance arrangement for children's social care, outside of the operational control of the Council is required". It is now three years since Bradford were rated as inadequate, and despite the commitment at a senior political and senior officer levels and by staff, sufficient improvement has not been achieved in addressing the failings identified in the 2018 inspection and subsequent monitoring visits. I do not think that the local authority has the capacity to improve children's services on their own. Consequently, it is my view that an alternative delivery model is required for a short period of time to support an improvement in services and outcomes.

13. Recommendation

In determining my recommendation, I have considered the following key strengths and challenges:

Strengths

- The commitment of the staff group to deliver good outcomes for children, despite the challenges they face
- The local authority has committed significant financial resource to support improvement and the allocation of a three-year budget will enable planned improvements to be made
- Elected members of all parties are committed to providing appropriate support and challenge to children's services
- The Chief Executive and Corporate Leadership team have prioritised children's services
- Strong Safeguarding and Improvement Boards
- Council's willingness to consider and commit to an innovative solution to improve services and outcomes

Challenges

- Stabilising the workforce, this will be a particular challenge given the authority's rating and recent events
- Creating the conditions that enable practitioners to deliver good practice and outcomes for children and families
- Recruiting a suitably experienced and skilled permanent senior leadership team for children's services
- Developing a strong partnership at both strategic and practice levels
- It is now three years since Bradford were rated as inadequate. It is, therefore, essential in my view, that any new arrangements are put in place as quickly as possible to minimise uncertainty and avoid further destabilising the service.

Options

I have considered the following options that are open to the Secretary of State:

Option 1: Retain non-executive commissioner role to continue to direct and support improvement

Benefits: The local authority has worked well with a commissioner in place. It has brought some added focus, expertise and urgency. It is the option that will be least disruptive. It would be the local authority's preferred option although the need for a more intensive option is recognised and accepted.

Risks: It may be difficult to sustain the pace of improvement in the long term.
It does not signify a significant change to staff, partners and public
A Commissioner may not have sufficient control to drive improvement.

Option 2: Partnership with a good local authority

Benefits: An improvement partnership with a good authority would provide additional expertise and leadership capacity to increase pace of improvement.

Risks: Bradford is a complex, metropolitan authority. It will be important that any partnering authority has a good understanding of the challenges faced by metropolitan authorities. Given the significant level of improvement required a local partner with considerable capacity is desirable. This limits the pool of potential partners.

It will take time to put in place.

Support is likely to be focused on specific service issues rather than whole scale culture change.

An improvement partner would not have sufficient control to drive improvement.

Option 3: Transfer of responsibility to another local authority

Benefits: Will provide the additional expertise and leadership capacity to drive improvement.

It would support whole culture change.

The partner authority would not have control of all the resources required to drive improvement such as human resources, IT and finance. This could be addressed through a Memorandum of Understanding or similar agreement with the local authority.

Risks: Bradford is a complex, metropolitan authority. It will be important that any partnering authority has a good understanding of the challenges faced by metropolitan authorities.

It would require a local partner willing to take on this level of responsibility

It will take time to negotiate arrangements and there is a risk of negative impact on staff.

It has not been possible to identify a suitable local authority

Option 4: Creation of independent trust with council full involvement

Benefits: It would provide a new start for staff and partners.

The Trust would have control of all the key resources required to drive improvement, such as human resources, IT, addressing current issues with the corporate centre and allowing greater flexibility.

It may be possible to include some or all of the following services as part of the Trust arrangement in addition to children's social care: education, youth offending services and early help resources. This would help to maintain an integrated approach and positive relationships between these services

A Trust could have the potential to attract new staff.

The council would be fully involved as a shared owner.

Risks: A key risk is that time that would be required to establish a Trust. The evidence to date is that a period twelve to twenty-four months is required to put arrangements in place. During this time there is a risk that progress would stall and some staff would leave during the period of

uncertainty. This is a particular risk in Bradford where progress has been slow to date.

It involves significant costs.

Option 5: Creation of independent trust without council full involvement

Benefits: It would provide a new start for staff and partners.

The Trust would have control of all the key resources required to drive improvement, such as human resources, IT, addressing current issues with the corporate centre and allowing greater flexibility.

A Trust could have the potential to attract new staff.

Risks: A key risk is that time that would be required to establish a Trust. The evidence to date is that a period twelve to twenty-four months is required to put arrangements in place. During this time there is a risk that progress would stall and some staff would leave during the period of uncertainty. This is a particular risk in Bradford where progress has been slow to date.

Education, youth offending services and early help resources may not be part of the Trust. This could impact on the relationship between these services.

It involves significant costs

There is a potential sixth option as follows:

Option 6: Appointment of an Executive Commissioner to direct and support improvement

Benefits: Quicker to put in place than a trust

Lower cost

Allows for integrated service development by keeping all children's services together including early help, education and youth offending services.

Provides additional experienced leadership capacity.

Risks: Untested model which has not previously been used

Comes with greater legal and delivery risks

Commissioner's ability to drive improvement likely to be constrained by lack of control over budget, HR and IT

Recommendation

It is my recommendation that service control should be removed from the council and an alternative delivery model be established.

The question of what type of alternative delivery model is less straightforward. It has not been possible during the period of this review to identify a suitable local authority that would be able to enter into a partnership with or take on responsibility for children's services in Bradford.

A children's trust would give the necessary control but the evidence available highlights that it will take between twelve and twenty-four months to establish a children's trust arrangement, even in situations where a council supports this approach. The situation in Bradford is unique. Usually, the decision to establish a children's trust is taken relatively soon after a poor inspection outcome. It is now three years since Bradford received an inadequate judgement and a further period of uncertainty could destabilise the service. This is a concern of leaders in Bradford. It should also be noted that in the past Bradford outsourced its education services to a private contractor in an arrangement that was called a Trust. This did not have positive results and the Council ended the arrangement because of the deterioration in services and outcomes. Although a children's trust would have a totally different basis there is some concern within the local authority and some partners, about establishing a trust for children's services because of the previous experience with education services.

For these reasons I recommend an alternative option (Option 6 above), which could be put in place more quickly. That is to strengthen the role of the Commissioner to give them more control and influence over decision making in relation to children's social care. The Director and staff of children's services, whilst remaining in the employ of the Council, would report to the Commissioner who would have the authority to make decisions and provide direction to children's services. The Commissioner would also be able to make decisions in relation to the delegated children's services budget and recruitment, including terms and conditions. This would streamline decision making allowing children's services to be more agile. As the Commissioner would be an experienced former senior leader of children's services this would strengthen leadership capacity in children's services in Bradford and provide stability whilst a permanent senior leadership team is recruited. This arrangement has the potential to avoid some of the more complex issues involved in establishing a Trust. For example, it would avoid the need to TUPE staff into a new organisation.

Given the need for rapid improvement the Commissioner could be supported by a small team of national experts with experience in delivering improvement. This could be further supplemented through an improvement partnership with another outstanding local authority in the region.

This offers a significant package of support to Bradford that would provide additional support and challenge. The Commissioner would ensure that improvement is driven and that prompt action is taken if satisfactory progress is not achieved.

The Leader of the Council and Chief Executive have expressed a willingness to work alongside colleagues in the Department for Education to support the development of an enhanced commissioner. They believe that this option offers the best opportunity to drive improvement for Bradford. They are willing to include other services relating to children's social care, such as early help, education and youth offending services within the scope of the Commissioner's authority. To ensure that the Commissioner would be able to access and control the key resources required to support improvement, such as HR and IT, council leaders are willing to second staff and delegate budgets for the children's services aspects of these services, to the Service. The Leader and Chief Executive are also looking at the possibility of a Memorandum of Understanding, or similar legal agreement, to ensure that the Commissioner has access to the appropriate corporate resources to drive improvement and to evidence the Council's commitment to the arrangement. If the local authority does not support the arrangement there is the option to escalate the arrangement into a Trust.

It could be possible to put this option in place quickly, minimising uncertainty and potential disruption. It is supported by the local authority and, therefore, offers the opportunity of partnership approach between the local authority and the Department for Education. It keeps all children's services – education, youth offending, early help – together allowing for integrated service development. It provides additional experienced leadership capacity to the service. It also gives some additional stability during a period of change. It is low cost allowing the potential for the Commissioner to have access to an 'invest to save' budget that they could use to support change in key areas.

However, this approach to the Commissioner role has not been used previously. The Commissioner's powers would only extend to children's services, with no control over other levers such as HR and IT. These could impact on the Commissioner's ability to drive improvement. Given the number of legal and operational issues there are to work through, the set-up time risks being similar to that of a Trust model.

I acknowledge that this approach has not been used before and there are legal and operational obstacles to overcome. However, I think that, given the circumstances in Bradford, it should be explored, and if it is not possible to resolve any obstacles in a suitable timescale I would recommend that further developmental work is undertaken in relation to this option for future use.

Whilst I have made clear my preferred recommendation for an alternative delivery model of an Executive Commissioner, I understand the legal and technical issues which constrain the use of this particular model at the current time.

Due to these constraints the local authority has indicated to the Department for Education that they are willing to create a trust to run children's services on their behalf.

Steve Walker
14 January 2022