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27 June 2025

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Dear Ms Bruce

Focused visit to Bolton children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Bolton children's services on 28 to 29 May 2025. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Gareth Dakin and Parveen Hussain.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need and child protection planning.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Headline findings

This was the first focused visit since the full inspection of children's services in 2023, which judged services to children in need of help and protection to require improvement to be good.

Since that time, senior leaders have taken appropriate steps to improve the help and support offered to children and young people, and they acknowledge that there is still more to do to ensure consistency in the quality of practice that supports children's progress and improves their lived experiences.

Senior leaders have welcomed external scrutiny and challenge from across the sector, and this has enhanced their understanding of how practice needs to evolve to support the needs of children in Bolton. There has been significant corporate investment in children's services, and this is increasing the capacity of services directly related to children in need of help and protection. Mature and robust arrangements are embedded with key safeguarding partners, which provides a secure platform for leaders in Bolton to transform services and improve practice.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?

- The quality of child-in-need and child protection assessments and plans.
- The quality and impact of recorded supervision and management decision-making.

Main findings

Thresholds for the help and protection of children in Bolton are clearly understood, and most children are receiving the right service at the right level, and, at the right time. A wide range of services across the council and partner agencies are supporting the progress and experience of children and their families.

Children receive timely interventions from social workers, who identify and respond to risk, and support children to make progress in accordance with their assessed needs. Children are seen regularly by their social workers, and, where appropriate, they are seen alone. For the majority of children, social workers take time to develop trusting relationships with them, and this is reflected in how children clearly articulate and understand their lived experiences.

Most social workers undertake purposeful direct work with children to better understand their circumstances. They utilise a range of methods to capture what children are saying, and this is reflected in how they describe the purpose of their interventions. However, the quality and recording of this work is inconsistent, which means that children's voices are not always as explicit as they could be on children's records.

Social workers engage with their professional partners effectively. Multi-agency network meetings, including core groups and child action meetings, are held regularly. These are well attended by relevant professionals working with children. This is contributing towards improved multi-agency accountability and a timely and collaborative approach to the help and protection of children.

Nevertheless, there is more to do to improve the quality of children's assessments, their plans and the effectiveness of supervision and management oversight of their circumstances. Leaders acknowledge these areas and are already taking steps in reviewing service delivery mechanisms. This includes increasing resources for staff and providing specific training to improve and develop these practice areas in Bolton, although it is too soon to see the full impact of these strategies on children.

From the assessments sampled, the current needs of children and risk are clearly identified and understood. Social workers evaluate the impact of risk of harm on children, and this is helping to improve their present circumstances. However, there is still more to do to ensure that the quality and depth of assessments fully reflect

children's lived experience. Weaker assessments are too brief, narrow in focus and do not evidence sufficient professional curiosity and challenge, whereas stronger assessments are comprehensive, detailed and written to the child. This variability in practice is directly influencing the quality and impact of some children's plans as a result.

Although we did not see significant detriment to children, progress in improving child-in-need and child protection planning has been directly impacted by instability in the workforce, which means that children's plans are not consistently effective. Leaders understand and acknowledge this, and they recognise that there is more work to do to improve consistency, especially in relation to child-in-need plans.

When concerns about domestic abuse are identified, a range of specialist agencies are engaged to provide additional support to children and their families. This is helping some parents to better understand the impact of domestic abuse on children, while also helping them to develop new support strategies. There is a dedicated service providing direct support to children affected by domestic abuse, and this is helping them to understand their experiences.

Disabled children in Bolton are appropriately assessed and supported in line with their needs. Safeguarding concerns are appropriately considered, and interventions are put in place in a timely way. Assessments and plans for disabled children mean that they are well supported, and their needs are reviewed and met. Siblings of disabled children are well understood, and active consideration is given to providing them with support, including access to young carers' support.

There is an inconsistent approach to the involvement of family networks across child-in-need and child protection planning. This means that some children are not afforded the additional safety and support of family and friends as part of their assessments and plans. Senior leaders have recognised this and are already taking steps to improve practice. A revised training offer for staff has been developed and the implementation of an enhanced service to support the involvement of family decision-making is being implemented. Leaders expect that this will increase the safety and support that family and friends' networks can offer to further safeguard and support children's progress. It was too soon to see the impact of this.

Since the last inspection, purposeful progress has been made for children who are subject to the pre-proceedings stage of the public law outline, and this is helping children to be appropriately supported and protected from harm. Leaders monitor and review pre-proceedings effectively so that social workers and managers understand what needs to happen, and when. A wide range of services are commissioned at the pre-proceedings stage which are bespoke to children's needs and are successfully diverting them from family court proceedings. Timely applications are made to the family courts where this intervention has not led to sustainable change. This level of rigour has had a positive impact for children in

reducing drift and delay and in making the right decisions for children in line with their timescales.

Workloads for some social workers in Bolton are too high. Leaders acknowledge the difficulties that they have had in relation to workforce stability since the last inspection and have taken decisive action in addressing this issue. A targeted recruitment strategy is gaining traction in stabilising the workforce, and this is having a positive impact on social workers' caseloads reducing.

Social Workers in Bolton have access to a range of training opportunities to support them to consolidate, refresh and develop their practice. Social workers we spoke with were able to show their strong commitment and focus on the work they do with children and families. Staff described the local authority as having a supportive and accessible culture that is driven by a caring, visible leadership team with child-focused strategic priorities.

More recently, social workers are receiving caseload supervision in line with practice expectations. Nevertheless, improvements in the quality of supervision and management oversight have not consistently improved since the last inspection. This means that some social workers have not had the right support and management oversight of their work.

Leaders are aware of the importance of good supervision in driving progress for children, and they are investing in this area of practice. The focused recruitment of a stable and permanent management group and revised practice standards aims to support this work. However, there is still more to do before supervision and management oversight are consistently effective in ensuring timely and proportionate progress for children.

Leaders know themselves well and understand their areas of strength and areas for development. Their self-evaluation reflects that more needs to be done to ensure that social work practice is consistently having a positive impact on outcomes for children. They are embedding the conditions for change, and there is evidence of strengthened practice. Effective performance and quality assurance information provides leaders with an accurate line of sight to current practice. It informs the understanding that leaders have about the quality of social work practice and children's experiences, and it enables them to respond swiftly to any areas of concern.

Leaders actively embrace the outcomes from quality assurance activity, which helps them to understand children's experiences and inform their service development plans. Quality assurance and performance management systems are providing leaders and managers with an accurate line of sight to social work practice. A clear audit framework provides an effective overview of practice in Bolton. Audit activity is providing leaders with a helpful insight into practice, and the learning is appropriately

influencing improvement activity. Moderation and post-audit analysis provide additional rigour, and leaders continue to take steps to ensure that they improve consistency, and that they are measuring the quality and impact of this activity.

The development and implementation of the national reform agenda is well understood by leaders in Bolton. Some reforms are at different stages of implementation. However, leaders are reporting that there is strong support from local partners, alongside the wider council, to ensure that meaningful and sustainable reform is achieved for the children of Bolton.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning the next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Gareth Dakin
His Majesty's Inspector