

Review of Safeguarding and Looked After Children's Services - Part 2

Bedford Borough Council

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Introduction

1 Bedford Borough Council and its partners continue to seek to improve the safeguarding of children. To add rigour and support to further improvement the Council asked us to complete an independent external challenge of the arrangements put in place and actions taken for safeguarding and looked after children. This was in advance of the unannounced inspection of front-line referral and assessment services and the fuller inspection of its safeguarding and looked after children services.

2 Ofsted inspected the Council's front-line referral and assessment services inspection in 2010 and again in May 2011. The Council came out of both inspections well with no areas for priority action.

3 We agreed to undertake the review in two phases:

- a review of front-line referral and assessment services and
- a review of the safeguarding and looked after services.

4 The purpose of the review was to:

- review progress against the front-line referral and assessment services action plan of 2010 identifying areas for improvement;
- test the robustness of policy and practice, proposing actions that are necessary to improve them;
- test Member and Officer readiness for the demands of an inspection and provide guidance as appropriate; and
- review the Council's and its partners' readiness for the safeguarding and looked after children services inspection.

5 We completed Part 1 of the review in May 2011. This considered the Council's and its partners' readiness for the unannounced Ofsted inspection of front-line contact, referral and assessment services. We completed and reported our work the week before the Ofsted inspection took place. Our findings from that work and the conclusions reached by Ofsted have been carried forward to inform the second part of the review.

6 Part 2 of the review focuses on Safeguarding and Looked After Children's services in the area. It is important to recognise the Ofsted inspection is of services in the area and not just Council services. This means that all partners involved in Safeguarding or Looked After Children's services will be under scrutiny. Ofsted will give only ten working days notice of the inspection. This means that partners need to be prepared for the inspection before its likely occurrence.

Background

7 Ofsted is conducting inspections of Safeguarding and Looked After Children's services in all single tier and county council areas over a three-year period ending June 2012. The newly formed unitary Bedford Borough Council took over responsibilities for children's services in April 2009, and it is not surprising the inspection has been left to the third year. This has given the new Council and its partners space to establish structures and approaches before the impact of those on outcomes for children and young people is tested.

8 In commissioning the review, the Council identified a number of risk areas that should be specifically included in the review.

Approach to Advice and Assistance work

9 Our agreed approach comprised:

- reviewing strategic and operational documents and action plans, testing the implementation and impact of these plans;
- evaluating evidence folders prepared by the Council and partners for the announced inspection to identify any gaps or shortfalls;
- reviewing the performance management and quality assurance framework;
- interviewing councillors, council managers and staff;
- conducting separate focus groups for partners, social workers and team managers; and
- carrying forward relevant findings from the review of front-line referral and assessment services and the Ofsted unannounced inspection of those services.

10 In conducting both parts of the review we:

- reviewed over 170 evidence documents;
- reviewed 17 Council case files relating to Safeguarding and Looked After children;
- interviewed 16 different social workers about those cases;
- interviewed the Mayor and both Portfolio Holders for Children Service's one of which is the designated Lead Member;
- interviewed 16 council officers;
- conducted focus groups of 9 social workers and 5 team managers; and
- interviewed 20 partners individually or in focus groups.

11 We completed three evaluations:

- how well services are performing judged against the Ofsted grade descriptors;
- the robustness of policy and practice areas proposing actions that are necessary to improve them; and
- the Council's and its partners' degree of readiness for the safeguarding and looked after children services inspection.

12 We matched our review to the published Ofsted evaluation and grade descriptors. But our view cannot accurately predict the judgements of the Ofsted inspection team. The inspection team is likely to examine a larger

and different sample of case files; the sampling will extend to other agencies' case files; the inspection will take longer with more inspectors than our review; and some issues will be examined in greater depth than we were able to do.

13 The Ofsted inspection report will contain judgements on a four point scale – outstanding, good, adequate, inadequate – in 33 distinct categories. Some of the judgements are composite. For example the judgement on Leadership and Management is based on six separate judgements such as ambition and prioritisation, partnerships and value for money. For both Safeguarding and Looked After Children there are two headline judgements – Overall Effectiveness and Capacity for Improvement – that are based on all the other judgements. Many reports carry a range of individual judgements that lead to composite judgements. So, judgements of 'inadequate' in individual categories do not necessarily lead to overall judgements of 'inadequate'.

14 We have made recommendations and identified action points to help the Council and its partners achieve better judgements across the board and, in particular, to avoid receiving any 'inadequate' judgements.

How well are services currently performing judged against the Ofsted grade descriptors?

Partnership working

15 There is a good commitment to safeguarding and looked after children across all agencies with good engagement in strategic planning from most. The establishment of safeguarding champions in many agencies has helped.

16 Front line partnership working is excellent and making a difference to children and families. Speed of convening and flexibility over location of strategy meetings; and joint assessment visits by social workers and health visitors are good examples.

17 The LSCB has an appropriate and independent chair. There is widespread understanding of the respective roles of the LSCB and the Children's Trust. Partners understand the need to adjust structures as the HWB becomes established.

18 Health partners are well engaged from all sectors. The designated GP has improved GP engagement and increased understanding and participation in child protection training across most practices. The voluntary sector is well represented and engaged. Providing free child protection training to voluntary agencies has helped with engagement and is widely appreciated. Probation is more engaged than previously. Police engagement is less consistent strategically and more work needs to be done to ensure that schools are fully engaged.

19 The LSCB ensures that opportunities to learn lessons from serious case reviews are available. It introduced the excellent initiative of multi-agency case file audits. While we have not seen the outputs from these we have been told that they have led to effective action plans that have improved practice.

Action Point

A9 Develop a short narrative about the multi-agency case file audits that identifies examples of improved practice.

20 Partners understanding of thresholds for intervention are variable. Thresholds for children at risk are widely understood and partners are confident that this is the case throughout agencies to the front line. However thresholds for children in need who are not at risk are not widely understood. This is an area for improvement. Some partners recognise that the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) is being used primarily as a

referral tool rather than an assessment of need. There are plans in place to re-launch the CAF with inter-agency training. There are also plans to revise the written thresholds combining those with the eligibility criteria for children with disabilities. Involving partners in that revision is an opportunity to widen understanding.

Recommendation

- R1** Ensure that partners are involved in the revision of thresholds and that the new thresholds are widely understood.
- There may be opportunities in the re-launch of the CAF to widen the understanding of thresholds.
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21 We used some indicators of under performance or undesirable practice as proxies for determining how well partners work together to improve services for children and families. They are:

- teenage pregnancy;
- medical examinations of sexually abused children in a police station;
- initial and annual medicals of LAC; and
- educational attainment of LAC.

22 Partners recognise the need to work together to improve all these factors with some success. Working together has identified other issues which have also been addressed and are leading to improvements.

23 Reducing teenage pregnancy has been difficult in Bedford for some years. Changes in agency responsibility have not helped, although this does not excuse agencies from working together to try to reduce it. Latterly focused attention and targeted intervention have led partners to cite recent improvements in proxy indicators.

Action Point

A10 Develop a short narrative that explains the recognition of the need for targeted intervention. Identify action and impact illustrated by data showing improvements in the proxy indicators.

24 Medical examinations of children suspected of being sexually abused are no longer taking place in a police station. Interim solutions are in place pending longer term arrangements.

Action Point

A11 Develop a short narrative that outlines recognition of the issue, how it was resolved and future plans.

- This is a success story that may be lost as something that is no longer happening may not be noticed unless highlighted.
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25 The last comparative performance indicators show poor performance in the timeliness of LAC medicals and dental checks. Partners recognised the need to improve but progress has been slow. We were given copies of the minutes of meetings to show the work taking place. These demonstrated difficulties in identifying accurate data and, in the early stages, a period of mutual blaming for the problems. Partners have worked together and now cite some improvements in performance although this may be inconsistent. This work also provided opportunities to begin to address difficulties with the process of adoption medicals, improving the promotion of good sexual health for LAC and developing the provision of non acute mental health services for LAC.

Action Point

A12 Develop a short narrative outlining that partners recognised the need to work together on LAC medical and dental examinations. Highlight actions taken to improve services and data showing any improvements.

- It is important to outline what you did to improve services rather than demonstrate the process you went through to reach agreement, particularly as it could be interpreted as poor partnership working to begin with.
- You may choose to develop separate short narratives about adoption medicals, improving the sexual health and the mental health of LAC.

26 Responsibility for the educational attainment of LAC is not as widely owned as it could be. There is a clear commitment from some schools, particularly where they have a greater proportion of vulnerable children. The Council recognises its role in promoting the needs of vulnerable children in schools where numbers are few and their needs are less well met. Improvement conversations with schools now routinely include consideration of the progress of vulnerable children, including LAC. Social workers' focus on educational attainment is variable. The Virtual School is well resourced but the impact on outcomes is still to emerge. The Head is clear that its responsibilities include all Bedford Borough's LAC wherever placed and the 50 or so LAC attending Bedford Borough schools from other areas. She described direct work with some Year 11 children to ensure GCSE coursework is completed and good revision plans are in place. Of the 22 LAC in the Year 11 cohort this year, between 4 and 6 are expected to achieve at least 5 good GCSEs – the main performance indicator.

Action Point

A13 Ensure that the GCSE examination results are collected and collated as soon as they are available so that the data can be used immediately. Prepare a short narrative outlining the specific additional work with this year's cohort and include the latest examination results.

Readiness for the Safeguarding and Looked After Children services inspection

27 In testing readiness, we agreed to conduct the review in a similar way to how Ofsted will conduct the inspection. This included document reviews in the same timescale, case file reviews, interviews with members, officers and partners either individually or in focus groups.

28 The Council and partners had intended to prepare document sets aligned to the main lines of enquiry outlined in the Ofsted evaluation schedule and grade descriptors. ⁱ This is an excellent idea but only the Police did this. Instead we had a large number of documents from some partners that were not ordered in any way. By contrast, the Council only provided documents that we specifically requested. We obtained additional documents from agency websites.

29 The result was that we had gaps in our understanding that inhibited our ability to fully assess services, for example our understanding of preventive services. We also had a surfeit of information about some issues which, perversely, could have created a negative picture, for example minutes of meetings about improving the performance on LAC medicals.

30 Partners can reap dividends if the document set is ordered as intended. Quality is better than quantity. A one or two page narrative with up to date information and data is much more useful than copies of minutes of meetings. The narrative should focus on what you have decided to target, together with supporting evidence illustrating the rationale for targets. Narratives should also focus on how action plans were implemented and, critically, outcomes for children and families. The processes by which you agree to act are less relevant. If you consider that some meeting minutes demonstrate a particular point do include them, for example weighing up evidence to determine an action, the range of partners involved in decision-making. But be selective and signpost what they are intended to show.

i Ofsted has published three guidance documents that can be accessed at <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/content/advancedsearch/summary?SearchText=inspection+of+safeguarding+and+looked+after+children&SearchSectionID=-1&SubTreeArray=84&SearchButton=Search>:

1. Inspections of safeguarding and looked after children services: Framework for inspection and guidance for local authorities and partners
2. Inspections of safeguarding and looked after children services: Evaluation schedule and grade descriptors
3. Conducting safeguarding and looked after children inspections: Guidance for the inspections of safeguarding and looked after children services

Action Point

A14 Prepare short narratives for areas of work or issues you wish to outline with an emphasis on outcomes rather than process. Order evidence to make it easy to navigate. For example align evidence to the to the main lines of enquiry outlined in the Ofsted evaluation schedule and grade descriptors

- If these are prepared now they can be updated periodically including during the ten day period of notice of the inspection.
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31 All the people that we interviewed individually or in focus groups engaged in the process well. They represented their agencies and partnership working well. They demonstrated individual and collective commitment to improving the lives of children and families. People found the hardest question to respond to well was the question about impact on outcomes for children. The best preparation for everyone is to consider their service as a whole and the component parts and make a list of the impacts achieved. Ideally this should be reinforced with data or examples including examples of satisfied customers.

Action Point

A15 Prepare for interviews and focus groups by listing the impacts services have had on outcomes for children and families.

Summary and Way Forward

32 We have identified a number of areas for improvement which if addressed will enhance the prospect of a positive outcome from the inspection. We have distinguished recommendations and action points. The action points are straightforward while the recommendations would be best addressed by a formal action plan. None of these is a major obstacle that would be difficult to overcome. Most can be mitigated simply. But to be most effective, partners need to implement the recommendations quickly. If actions cannot be fully completed by the inspection it will be important to evidence progress towards completion. This will demonstrate commitment to continuous improvement and should be viewed positively by inspectors.

Recommendations

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R7 Ensure that partners are involved in the revision of thresholds and that the new thresholds are widely understood.

- There may be opportunities in the re-launch of the CAF to widen the understanding of thresholds.

Action Points

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