

Adult Social Care, Children's Services and Education Committee



Reading
Borough Council
Working better with you

22 July 2024

| | |
|------------------------------|---|
| Title | Ofsted Inspection of Reading's Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) |
| Purpose of the report | To note the report for information |
| Report status | Public report |
| Report author | Lara Patel, Executive Director Children's Services |
| Lead Councillor | Cllr Wendy Griffiths |
| Corporate priority | Thriving Communities |
| Recommendations | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. That the ILACS report is noted2. That the actions taken to date are noted3. That the request for the Executive Director for Children's Services to be given delegated authority to submit the required action plan to Ofsted in consultation with the Lead Member for Children's Services and Chief Executive of the Council, is approved. |

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. In April 2024 Reading Borough Council's Children's Services delivered by Brighter Futures for Children were subject to an Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS). The Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) inspection is conducted by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted). Ofsted examine and scrutinise services that provide care for children and young people. This is conducted under the [ILACS Framework](#).
- 1.2. All local authority children's services across the country are inspected, the frequency of which is dependent upon their grade. Reading's children's services were last inspected, as Brighter Futures for Children, in September 2019 and upgraded from 'inadequate' (in 2016) to 'requires improvement to be good'.
- 1.3. The inspection was conducted over three weeks from 15th April 2024, the first week being offsite and the second two weeks on site at the Council's Civic Offices and other sites in Reading.
- 1.4. During the inspection inspectors:
 - Focused on social workers' direct practice with families by scrutinising and discussing a sample of children's records.
 - Held discussions with practitioners working with children – this included social workers, family help workers, reviewing officers, managers and education staff.
 - Met with children, young people, care leavers, parents and carers including foster carers and adopters.
 - Met with leaders and managers across the Council, Brighter Futures for Children and other partner agencies to understand how we work together to safeguard children.

1.5. The final report was published on 12th July 2024. Inspectors made the following judgements:

| Judgement | 2024 Grade | 2019 Grade |
|---|--|---|
| Overall effectiveness | Requires Improvement to be Good | Requires Improvement to be Good |
| The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection | Requires Improvement to be Good | Requires Improvement to be Good |
| The experiences and progress of children in care | Good | Requires Improvement to be Good |
| The experiences and progress of care leavers | Good | Not a separate grade in the 2019 inspection framework |
| The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families | Requires Improvement to be Good | Requires Improvement to be Good |

1.6. The report identifies a number of strengths, including:

- BfFC delivers a range of impressive and impactful Family Help services that are reducing children’s needs for statutory intervention.
- There are robust arrangements in place for children who go missing from home, children who are electively home educated and children missing education.
- Advocacy and engagement activities have been developed and improved and children participate in their reviews and corporate parenting panel, ensuring children’s views are heard.
- Most children in care live in stable, nurturing and caring homes where their needs are well met, and they flourish.
- Social workers, leaving care PA’s, Independent Reviewing Officers and the Virtual School are ambitious for children in care and care leavers. Children in care receive effective education and form positive relationships and build trust with their social workers. Care leavers receive careful and effective practical support from committed and skilled PA’s. Disabled children’s needs are well understood by skilled workers.
- Leaders recognise the need to improve and build placement sufficiency and choice for children in care and there is a real focus and intention to keep children living locally.
- Leaders have been successful in recruiting permanent staff and stabilising the workforce.
- There is now a stable senior leadership team in place with a shared understanding of what needs to be done and significant improvements have been made in some areas, most notably for children in care and care leavers.

- The BFfC Transformation Programme addresses the right priorities and there is a clear vision for the delivery of the service.

1.7. The report outlines the following areas that need to improve:

- The quality of assessment, planning and provision for children in need, 16 and 17year-olds who are homeless and children living in private fostering arrangements.
- The timely identification of risk for children.
- The workforce development, training and support offer to attract and retain staff.
- The timely assessment of and support for connected carers, kinship carers and special guardians.
- The development and embedding of the response to children at risk of harm outside the home.
- The timely publication of the local offer for care leavers and the implementation of the delayed measures to improve corporate parenting for care-experienced young people.

1.8. At the time of the inspection work was, and remains, underway to build on strengths and address areas of improvement through the delivery of Brighter Futures for Children's Continuous Improvement Plan and Transformation Programme. The report notes that *'the transformation plan addresses the right priorities and there is a clear vision for the delivery of services. Some progress is already evident and senior leaders have a good understanding of the improvements that have yet to be achieved.'*

1.9. An action plan in response to the recommendations is required to be submitted to Ofsted by 21st October 2024.

2. Policy Context

2.1. Incorporated on 5 April 2018 and operational since 3 December 2018, Brighter Futures for Children (BFfC), a company limited by guarantee, delivers children's services on behalf of Reading Borough Council (RBC). The company is wholly owned by but independent of the Council and is governed by an independent Board to ensure operational autonomy.

2.2. Ofsted examine and scrutinise services that provide care for children and young people. This is conducted under the [ILACS Framework](#).

3. The Proposal

3.1. Brighter Futures for Children has an embedded Continuous Improvement Plan and Transformation Programme which, together had started to address some of the areas for improvement outlined in the ILACS Report prior to the inspection. The Continuous Improvement Plan has been updated to reflect the inspection findings.

3.2. Progress to date includes:

- Reduction in caseloads due to targeted work to ensure timely and appropriate closures to the service, step downs to family help and universal early help.
- The short-term addition of agency staff to provide increased capacity in some teams.
- Work across the partnership and within children's services' front door' to ensure timely and proportionate responses to children and families' needs and to prevent escalation of need. The refreshed Early Help Strategy will be approved at the One Reading Partnership Board in July.

- Work across the Partnership to develop our Family Hub model to meet needs earlier across all services working with children in Reading.
 - Our Workforce Strategy and Implementation Plan refresh will be approved at Brighter Futures for Children's Board on 25th July 2024.
 - Our Care Leavers' Offer has been updated with Care Leavers and will be approved at Corporate Parenting Panel on 16th July and published.
 - Local Authority Fostering South East, our regional fostering recruitment hub went live on 8th July 2024.
- 3.3. A system wide approach has been taken in relation to continuous improvement with a range of activity yielding both short- and longer-term impacts. Our continued drive to improve and transform has increased in both pace and focus and we remain ambitious for Reading's children and committed to addressing the specific areas of improvement identified at pace.

4. Contribution to Strategic Aims

- 4.1. The Council's new Corporate Plan has established three themes for the years 2022/25. These themes are:
- Healthy Environment
 - Thriving Communities
 - Inclusive Economy
- 4.2. The ILACS report and Brighter Futures for Children's response to the report contribute to the Council's theme of Thriving Communities by ensuring that Reading's children are safeguarded and supported to thrive and meet their full potential.

5. Environmental and Climate Implications

- 5.1. None noted.

6. Community Engagement

- 6.1. Ofsted spoke to local children (including children looked after and care leavers), parents and carers, foster carers and other agencies providing services to Reading's children and families as part of the inspection process.

7. Equality Implications

- 7.1. Under the Equality Act 2010, Section 149, a public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to -
- eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
 - advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
 - foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.
- 7.2. An Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) is not required as the report does not have a differential impact on people with protected characteristics these are: age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex (gender) or sexual orientation. However, it is noted that the report and its recommendations includes reference to care experienced young people, a protected characteristic in Reading.

8. Other Relevant Considerations

8.1. None noted.

9. Legal Implications

9.1. Brighter Futures for Children, on behalf of Reading Borough Council are required to publish the report on our website and develop an action plan to be submitted to Ofsted by 21st October 2024.

10. Financial Implications

10.1. None noted.

11. Timetable for Implementation

11.1. 12th July 2024 report publication on Ofsted website.

11.2. 21st October 2024 Brighter Futures for Children to submit action plan to Ofsted.

12. Background Papers

12.1. There are none.

Appendices

1. **Ofsted Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services Report**

2. **Children's Summary Report**