

Adult Social Care, Children's Services and Education Committee



Reading
Borough Council

Working better with you

18 March 2026

Title	Children's Services Improvement Board Inaugural Report
Purpose of the report	To note the report for information
Report status	Public report
Executive Director/ Statutory Officer Commissioning Report	Lara Patel, Executive Director Children's Services
Report author	Andy Couldrick, Independent Chair, Children's Services Improvement Board
Lead Councillor	Cllr Wendy Griffith, Lead Councillor for Children
Council priority	Safeguard & support the health & wellbeing of Reading's adults & children
Recommendations	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. To note the report2. That Committee receives an update on progress of the Children's Services Improvement Board on a six-monthly basis

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. On the 28 January 2025 Council agreed not to extend its contract with Brighter Futures for Children Ltd and to bring its Children's Services back in-house. The transition back into the Council took place on 1st October 2025.
- 1.2. This decision required the establishment of an independently chaired Children's Services Improvement Board. A report recommending the Terms of Reference and appointment process for an Independent Chair was presented to Council in June 2025. Andy Couldrick was appointed as the independent chair and the Board was convened in November 2025.
- 1.3. It was also a requirement of the transition that the Board reported into ACE Committee. This is the first such report.

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, delivered children's services on behalf of Reading Borough Council (RBC). The company was wholly owned by but independent of the Council and was governed by an independent Board to ensure operational autonomy.
- 2.2. On the 28 January 2025 Council agreed not to extend its contract with Brighter Futures for Children Ltd and to bring its Children's Services back in-house. The transition back into the Council took place on 1st October 2025.
- 2.3. Following the JTAI of the multi-agency response to children in Reading who are victims of domestic abuse, the Department for Education (DfE) issued a non-statutory Improvement Notice to the Council, followed by the appointment of a DfE Improvement

Advisor. The DfE Improvement Advisor sits on the Children's Services Improvement Board.

3. The Proposal

- 3.1. The Independent Chair's inaugural report outlines the initial progress made by the Children's Services Improvement Board, the drivers required for sustained improvement and the areas of focus for the Board.

4. Contribution to Strategic Aims

- 4.1. The Council Plan has established five priorities for the years 2025/28. The priorities that the children's Services Improvement Board contribute to are:

- Promote more equal communities in Reading
- Safeguard and support the health and wellbeing of Reading's adults and children
- Ensure Reading Borough Council is fit for the future

- 4.2. In delivering these priorities, we will be guided by the following set of principles:

- Putting residents first
- Building on strong foundations
- Recognising, respecting, and nurturing all our diverse communities
- Involving, collaborating, and empowering residents
- Being proudly ambitious for Reading

5. Environmental and Climate Implications

- 5.1. None.

6. Community Engagement

- 6.1. Reports to the Children's Services Board are informed by feedback from children and families gathered in a number of ways including, coproduction, compliments and complaints and participation work.

7. Equality Implications

- 7.1. An Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) is not required as the report itself does not have a differential impact on people with protected characteristics. However, it is important to recognise the intersectionality between protected characteristics and the impact on children. This includes care experienced young people, a protected characteristic in Reading.

8. Other Relevant Considerations

- 8.1. None noted

9. Legal Implications

- 9.1. None noted.

10. Financial Implications

- 10.1. The Independent Chair is funded through the Children's Services budget.

11. Timetable for Implementation

- 11.1. The Children's Services Improvement Board was established in November 2025.

12. Background Papers

- 12.1. There are none.

Appendices

1. Independent Chairs Inaugural Report

Appendix 1

Reading Borough Council Children's Services Improvement Board Report to Adult Social Care, Children's Services and Education Committee

18 March 2026

Introduction

I was appointed as Independent Chair of Reading's Improvement Board in September 2025.

My background:

- Qualified social worker
- DCS Wokingham BC
- Chief Executive Wokingham BC
- Chief Executive, Birmingham Children's Trust
- Commissioner, DfE

The Board was established in the context of the winding up of Brighter Futures for Children, a company solely owned by RBC to deliver children's services, and the reintegration of children's services into the Council last year.

Ofsted inspected Reading's children's services in April 2024 and rated services 'Requires Improvement' overall, with ratings of Good for services to looked after children and care leavers. This was an improved position on the previous inspection outcome.

A Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) was carried out in March 2025, focused on the multi-agency response to domestic abuse. This inspection led to an identified 'Area for Priority Action' concerning shortfalls in the multi-agency strategic safeguarding partnership leading to systemic weaknesses in multi-agency safeguarding practice. This led to an Improvement Notice from the Department for Education and the appointment of a Children's Services Advisor. It is worth noting that while the focus of the inspection is on the multi-agency partnership, the response focuses on the Council as the Department does not have a mechanism for holding partner agencies to account in the same way. The Advisor, however, focuses his work on supporting the Safeguarding Partners to improve practice to address the shortfalls found in the JTAI.

The Improvement Board met for the first time in November 2025 and has met three times altogether. Its Terms of Reference and current forward plan are appended to this report, for Members' information. The Board has been well-attended with excellent engagement to date.

I am aware that the DCS and her team are supporting two external advisors and boards currently, as well as a programme of Ofsted Monitoring Visits, and the DfE Advisor and I work together to ensure we are not duplicating work or making unmanageable demands of the team, as their focus needs to continue to be on driving improvement in the quality of practice and practice leadership across the service.

The forward plan highlights the key areas of interest for the Board: performance and quality of practice, workforce, readiness for and feedback from Ofsted monitoring visits are routine items for oversight and discussion. Routine updates will be received from the Partnership Board chaired by the DfE Advisor. In addition, a series of 'deep dives' will be undertaken to examine in greater detail areas of particular interest and/or concern to the Board. These will include, in the first year of the Board's operation:

- Children's Services Transformation programme
- Children living with family and friends

- Fostering
- Placement costs and the costs of care for children in Reading

It might be helpful to share some of my initial observations and thoughts about the service and some key issues that will need to be focused on:

- Stable leadership of children's services is critical to sustained improvement and has been absent in Reading for a long time. The current leaders in the service have led some improvement already and it is to be hoped they will continue to lead the service and drive further improvement.
- The reintegration of children's services from Brighter Futures into the Council was completed successfully but there is work to do in terms of culture and relationships to ensure that it becomes a fully integrated part of the Council once more.
- Strong corporate and political leadership of the Council is evident and will support this reintegration
- Children's Services in Reading has been supported with financial investment, but the cost of delivering children's services is a challenge, and some unit costs for care are higher than for comparable authorities. This is a familiar picture across councils, but will need to be a matter of determined focus to drive costs down effectively and safely.
- While numbers in care in Reading are broadly in line with statistical neighbour authorities, this is not the case across the social care pathway: referrals, open children, assessments, Children in Need, Child Protection numbers are all higher than for comparable authorities
- Reading's improvement activity needs to dovetail with the transformation programme that is addressing the social care reforms being implemented nationally. Getting these changes right should support reducing costs as well as delivering services to families in a very different, and better, way going forward, but maintaining the focus simultaneously on continuous improvement of the quality of practice will be critical
- The social care workforce is largely inexperienced and the additional support needs this brings is now recognised and being addressed
- This inexperience increases the importance of effective first line management of practice and there is a need to maintain a focus on growing capacity and strength in this tier of the organisation
- A new approach to Quality Assurance has been introduced and will need to be embedded. Service leaders will need to ensure that there is effective 'closing of the loop' in relation to quality assurance and practice evaluation (that is to say we must ensure that the learning we get from audit and evaluation leads to changes and improvement at a casework level and shapes the training and development needs of the service)

The Improvement Board will monitor progress in all of these areas.

I have been impressed with the political, corporate and service leadership I have seen to date, and am confident that the ingredients for ongoing and sustained improvement of children's services are in place, albeit everyone recognises there is more to do.

Appendix i: Terms of Reference for CIB

Appendix ii: Forward Plan, CIB

Andy Couldrick

**Independent Chair,
Reading Children’s Services Improvement Board**

February 2026

Reading's Children's Services Improvement Board Delivering Good and Outstanding Services for Reading's Children

Terms of Reference

Purpose

Oversee and drive at pace the delivery of improved practice across Children's Services in Reading leading to better outcomes for children who need our support, including children with special educational needs and disabilities.

To seek assurance and triangulate data that demonstrates that improvements are embedded and sustained.

To ensure that all partners providing services for children in Reading are working together effectively.

To support the Service in focussing on 'getting the basics right' and improving the consistency and quality of social work practice within Children's social care.

To ensure that the Service's Improvement Plan combined with its Transformation Programme increase quality and reduce cost, delivering a sustainable Service that represents value for money.

To ensure the voice of children and young people is fully heard, considered and reflected both in social work practice and the work of the Board

To provide assurance to the Council that appropriate scrutiny and challenge is driving sustained improvements across Children's Services.

To provide bi-annual progress reports to Reading Borough Council's ACE Committee.

Approach

Priorities of the Board will be aligned to inspection findings, progress against inspection findings and emerging risks, and will therefore change over time. Initially they will be focussed on the findings of the Ofsted ILACS (2024) and the JTAI (2025).

The Board will provide scrutiny and independent challenge of the continuous practice improvement plan to support the development and delivery of consistently good and outstanding services.

The Board will identify barriers to improvement and take a solution-focused approach to aid problem solving.

The Board will monitor key performance data (which tells us about how services are doing, and what outcomes are being achieved) to ensure it is

delivering on its objectives.

The Board will focus on the big picture.

The Board will be curious in its approach, adopting a positive learning culture.

Who will be on the Board and how will it work?

The Board will be a partnership of equals, and all members will be expected to be actively involved. Members of the Board will respect that we are all different and that we and our children must not be discriminated against because of age, sex, disability, race, religion, belief or sexual orientation.

Members of the Board must comply with the Council's code of conduct and the general principles of public life. [The Seven Principles of Public Life - GOV.UK](#)

Meetings will be held in person every six weeks (approx. 8 times a year). A schedule of meetings for the year will be agreed and circulated in advance. Board members will be expected to have read papers in advance and to prepare for meetings

Members of the Board are asked to do everything they can to attend meetings.

Board members

It is proposed that the Board will initially comprise the members set out below. However, additional members may be coopted in future subject to the agreement of the Leader, Chief Executive and Chair.

Members

Independent Chair (subject matter Expert)
DfE Improvement Advisor
Reading Borough Council Chief Executive
Lead Member for Children's Services
Executive Director of Children's Services (DCS)
Section 151 Officer
ICB senior representative
A.N Other member representative

The Chair in consultation with the CEO and DCS will agree agendas. It is anticipated that there will be standard agenda items and reporting templates in order to track progress. However, deep dives into particular issues may also be requested.

The Board may request relevant officers & subject matter experts to attend to brief them on specific topics.

Papers will be circulated electronically 5 working days in advance of meetings. Action notes will be taken and circulated within 5 working days of the meeting.

Reading Children's Services Improvement Board

Forward Plan

2025/26

Meeting Frequency

It is proposed that the CSIB will meet on a 6-weekly basis.

We need to ensure as a Board that we spend our time productively, balancing our focus on performance and quality measures and reports and taking a 'deep dive' approach to focus on particular areas of children's services activity and performance, informed by our collective understanding of risk, challenge and opportunities.

We need also to continue to check in with the Partnership Board chaired by the DfE Advisor, Steve Crocker, to ensure we continue to avoid duplication of activity and avoid gaps in our collective scrutiny, support and challenge.

Performance and Quality data will be available at each meeting, but at deep dive meetings we may look only at highlights and risk areas as flagged by the DCS

So a proposed forward plan looks as follows:

Meeting 2 (17 December):

- Performance and Quality
- Ofsted Monitoring Visit 1
- Service Self-Evaluation (updated)
- Service Transformation programme, including the 'roadmap' and potential Newton Europe commission
- Forward plan agreement

Meeting 3 (10 February)

- Performance and Quality
- Service update: highlights and risks
- Deep dive: findings from review commissioned into Kinship care: support; breakdown; capacity; learning
- Deep Dive: Fostering Recruitment

Meeting 4 (14 April)

- Performance and Quality
- Service update
- Partnership board: update
- Transformation update
- Workforce update: Foundations programme; recruitment and retention

Meeting 5 (1 June)

- Performance and Quality

- Service update
- Ofsted Monitoring Visit 2
- Placement Sufficiency and Placement Costs

Meeting 6 (21 July)

- Performance and Quality
- Service update
- Service Transformation update
- Fostering: recruitment, retention, innovation

Meeting 7 (1 September)

- Performance and Quality
- Service Update
- Partnership Board update
- Workforce update

There is, of course, scope to add to this as issues arise

Andy Couldrick
Independent Chair
November 2025