

Adult Social Care, Children's Services and Education Committee



Reading
Borough Council

Working better with you

15 October 2025

Title	Joint Targeted Area Inspection Progress
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	Lisa James – Interim Director Transformation, Improvement and QA
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 progress in the delivery of the Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) Partnership Action Plan (Appendix 1).

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. A Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) took place in Reading from 24 February to 14 March 2025. It was an inspection of the partnership, carried out by inspectors from Ofsted, the Care Quality Commission (CQC), His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP). The outcome of this inspection was reported to ACE Committee on the 2nd July 2025. The July paper outlined the findings of the inspection and shared Brighter Futures for Children's Single Agency plan alongside the Partnership JTAI plan which has now been submitted to Ofsted. ACE Committee were recommended to note the inspection findings and Committee requested that progress updates be presented by the partnership.
- 1.2. This JTAI focused on the multi-agency response to unborn children and children aged 0 to 7 years who are victims of domestic abuse. Inspectors' evaluation of strategic arrangements in Reading considered the multi-agency response to children of all ages.
- 1.3. JTAI's are ungraded partnership inspections that result in a letter identifying strengths and areas for improvement. Ofsted guidance sets out that this can include an area of priority action if inspectors '*identify a serious weakness that is placing children at risk of inadequate protection or significant harm.*'
- 1.4. The findings of the inspection were [published](#) on 6 May 2025.
- 1.5. The final letter included the following Areas of Priority Action for the partnership:

Inconsistent information-sharing between partners resulting in delays for children, poor-quality risk assessments that fail to address the experiences and needs of children and often weak decision-making for children.
- 1.6. As a consequence of receiving Areas of Priority Action, an Improvement Notice was issued to RBC on 31st July 2025 [Improvement notice issued to Reading Borough Council: July 2025 -](#)

GOV.UK and a DfE Improvement Advisor was appointed to oversee the partnership's progress against the areas of improvement.

- 1.7. Decisive action was taken by the partnership during the JTAI, whereby both multi and single agency action plans were implemented at pace to address child level, operational and strategic areas of weakness.
- 1.8. The Partnership Action Plan in response to the findings was submitted to Ofsted on 7th August 2025 as required (Appendix 1).
- 1.9. Over 85% of actions are completed or in progress for both plans. Governance and scrutiny of both the single and multi-agency action plans is now well embedded.
- 1.10. Progress against the action plans includes a significant improvement in the timeliness of practice to safeguard children, including strategy meetings and visits. Expectations regarding both compliance and quality of practice have been established across the partnership through workshops and the reissuing of guidance and procedures. Escalation processes are now well understood, with evidence of escalations taking place and having a positive impact on practice across the partnership. An assessment service has been established in BFFC, in consultation with staff, to improve the quality and timeliness of assessment and to reduce workloads across social workers to strengthen practice.
- 1.11. This has been achieved within the context of high numbers of children open to children's social care and on a Child Protection Plan.
- 1.12. The impact of improved compliance on outcomes for children will be evaluated through the partnership audit on domestic abuse due to conclude by the end of September and through ongoing scrutiny by the DfE Improvement Advisor and forthcoming monitoring visits by Ofsted.

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. 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 and appointed a DfE Improvement Advisor. Monitoring visits by Ofsted will commence in November and will take place approximately every 4 months until the next full inspection of children's services (ILACS) which is due in spring 2027.
- 2.3. The DfE Improvement Advisor sits on the Brighter Futures for Children's Quality Assurance and Improvement Committee, which is to be replaced by an independently chaired RBC Children's Services Improvement Board following the transfer of Children's Service back to the Council on the 1st October 2025.

3. Progress to date

- 3.1. Comprehensive and robust single and multi-agency action plans have been implemented, with over 85% of actions completed or in progress for both plans. Governance and scrutiny of both the single and multi-agency action plans are now well embedded.
- 3.2. Progress against the action plans includes a significant improvement in the timeliness of practice to safeguard children, including strategy meetings and visits. Expectations regarding both compliance and quality of practice have been established across the partnership through workshops and the reissuing of guidance and procedures. Escalation processes are now well understood, with evidence of escalations taking place and having a positive impact on the timeliness of practice across the partnership. (See appendix 2).
- 3.3. Critical to the success of the JTAI Action Plan was a functional change made to the Together for Families Service, which meant separating out the function of assessment and thus creating an Integrated Assessment Service aligned with children's services front door. The aim of this

change was to create manageable workloads, to improve the quality and timeliness of assessment and to reduce workloads across social workers, in turn strengthening practice. This was done in collaboration and consultation with staff and the new Integrated Assessment Service launched on the 1st September 2025.

- 3.4. The above has been achieved within the context of high numbers of children open to children's social care and on a Child Protection Plan.
- 3.5. The impact of improved compliance on outcomes for children will be evaluated through the partnership audit on domestic abuse due to report findings in October and through ongoing scrutiny by the DfE Improvement Advisor and forthcoming monitoring visits by Ofsted, the first of which will take place in November and focus on the front door.
- 3.6. Brighter Futures for Children's **single agency rapid improvement action plan** is 92% complete. With 44 of the 48 actions completed, the final four are in progress and will be absorbed into the second phase of Rapid Improvement Planning.
- 3.7. The Rapid Improvement Plan has seen the successful conclusion of two Together for Families staff consultations (Family Support Workers working with Children in Need and the establishment of an Assessment Service) and improved timeliness for children in need of protection (our focus area for development) meaning more children are seen and heard.
- 3.8. The improvement to key performance indicators is the best reported in the last 12 months for our focused areas of practice. Strategy meeting timeliness is now vastly improved, consistently above 95% with most weeks reporting 100% timeliness. This significant change is a result of targeted work to reset with partners and our own managers' child centred expectations. Child Protection Visits and ICPC Timeliness are the highest they have been in 12 months and exceeding milestone targets. Whilst this is a point of celebration, what is most important is that this change is sustained and maintained. This change means that focus can now shift to the quality and impact of our service delivery.
- 3.9. To support improved compliance and quality of practice, the QA Framework and Programme have been reviewed, these along with revised Practice Standards were relaunched in July 2025. Workshops have been delivered to staff groups; Practice Corner a new addition to our weekly newsletter has been launched to keep staff up to date with developments in this area and our newly appointed Principal Social Worker is rolling a Foundations of Practice programme.
- 3.10. A new performance framework is now established, supported by a new and improved PowerBi Dashboard. This new framework and reporting is proving effective in the timely identification of priority areas of focus, enabling improvement work to be targeted in the right areas at pace and improving outcomes for children and cross directorate learning.
- 3.11. To ensure management grip and oversight, a single escalation tracker has been introduced and is reviewed weekly by the Director of Transformation, Improvement and QA (interim) with service leads to ensure escalations are responded to in a timely way and that themes and learning is captured and fed back into work to strengthen practice. This is helping to address a culture where individuals had stopped or were reluctant to raise practice concerns, masking some the issues identified in the JTAI.
- 3.12. Workloads for social workers has remained too high. This remains a critical risk area for workforce sustainability and quality of practice. Transition to the new operating model went live on 1st September 2025. This was an intentional move to separate out assessment and longer-term work, following feedback from staff who cited this as the most effective way to reduce workloads and improve the quality and timeliness of practice. From the 1st September there was a period of 3 weeks where the Together for Families teams did not receive any new work, during which time workloads have started to reduce.
- 3.13. The above has been achieved during a time where the total number of children open to social care has increased by 15% year-on-year, with a 48% rise in Child Protection Plans over the past 12 months (August 2024 – August 2025), meaning the service is working with the highest number of children open and the highest number of children on Child Protection Plans. This sharp escalation, particularly in Child Protection Plans, places our rate significantly above both

Statistical Neighbours (SNs) and national benchmarks, indicating a potential shift in threshold application or increased complexity in presenting needs. To address this a review of Child Protection Plans has been undertaken, alongside strengthening triage in the front door. A targeted learning and development plan will be set in place over the autumn term, and this will include training on Thresholds.

- 3.14. The Rapid Improvement Plan laid the essential groundwork for Children's Social Care, enabling further improvements, driving efficiencies, and supporting performance reporting. Improvement in Children's Social Care is an ongoing journey. Sustainable change will take time to introduce, deliver, and embed. Phased improvement plans will be introduced quarterly to identify and address areas for change.
- 3.15. The next iteration of improvement plan for phase 2 has been drafted across the eight focus areas with an emphasis on strengthening the quality of practice.

Priority Area
1. Timeliness of strategy meetings
2. Children being seen regularly
3. Safety plans
4. Timeliness of s47 child protection investigations and single assessments
5. Timeliness of Initial Child Protection Conferences
6. Timeliness of Core Groups
7. Regular high-quality case supervision and management oversight
8. Timeliness of Care Proceedings

- 3.16. Learning and actions have been identified through QA reports completed between June and August, and a whole staff workshop was held on 4th September. Actions from the reports and workshop will be delivered through phase two of the Improvement Plan. A meeting with Heads of Service on 30th September will determine the appropriate allocation for each action and the next phase of the Improvement Plan will be launched on the 1st October.
- 3.17. The actions in the **multi-agency JTAI Improvement Plan** are 86% complete and in progress. The Strategic Partnership Meetings have been reduced by DfE Advisor to monthly from October in recognition of progress made with Partnership Operational Group continuing to meet fortnightly to drive the plan.
- 3.17.1. Multi-agency safety planning has been established as a practice standard. Clear expectations have been set in respect to child-centred and individual safety plans as an outcome of strategy meetings and are now in place across the partnership, with a positive impact on outcomes for children being seen in the much-improved timeliness of convening Strategy Meetings.
- 3.17.2. Multi-agency workshops to socialise and embed practice expectations have taken place across June and July, with more planned for the autumn term.
- 3.17.3. The infrastructure to support driving the partnership JTAI plan and mechanisms to flag risk and evaluate progress bi-weekly are in place.

- 3.17.4. An independent review of the Domestic Abuse Strategic Partnership Board has been commissioned and concluded. The findings, recommendations and action plan were presented to the Reading Community Safety Partnership in September.
- 3.17.5. The Children's Task and Finish Group, reporting to the Domestic Abuse Strategic Partnership Board has been reconfigured and a new Terms of Reference agreed. The Task and Finish Group will lead the delivery of the Berkshire West Safeguarding Partnership (BWSCP) Priority to Safeguard Children from Domestic Abuse and will report to both the BWSCP and the Domestic Abuse Strategic Partnership Board (which reports into the CSP).
- 3.17.6. A partnership domestic abuse audit approach and audit template has been developed, with the partnership audit on domestic abuse taking place on 3rd September, concluding with a partnership panel day to review findings and agree actions on 29th September 2025.

3.17.7. With regards to the multi-agency JTAI Improvement Plan the following work is in progress:

- 3.17.8. Achieving Best Evidence (ABE) joint training with TVP is scheduled and staff have been identified to attend
- 3.17.9. The peer review of BFfC Children's Single Point of Access (CSPoA) by Kent Children's Services (as a Sector Led Improvement Partner) to assess effectiveness of CSPoA is due to conclude in October 2025.
- 3.17.10. The consolidation of partnership data and quality assurance to strengthen safeguarding is underway to be approved by the Partnership Improvement Strategic Group by the end of October 2025.

4. Contribution to Strategic Aims

- 4.1. The Council Plan has established five priorities for the years 2025/28. The priorities that response to the inspection findings 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. Ofsted spoke to children and families impacted by domestic abuse and other agencies providing services to Reading's children and families as part of the inspection process. This included providers of specialist domestic abuse services across Reading.
- 6.2. To fully assess the impact of the improvement work underway, children and their families are engaged both to understand their views on the work we are undertaking to improve services and to hear from them on their experience of receiving our services. We hear the voice of children and their families in all of the work that we do from answering the phone in the front door, to our social work visits, children attending their child protection conferences and through more organised participation work and activities. Hearing from children and families is also a core part of our quality assurance programme. What we are hearing from our children about their experience of services is reported to a monthly performance meeting chaired by the Executive Director of Children's Services and attended by managers across children's services care, this then informs our improvement plans and strategic thinking.

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 itself 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 important to recognise the intersectionality between protected characteristics and domestic abuse 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. If an area for priority action is relevant to the local authority, the inspection framework requires Ofsted to inform the Department for Education (DfE). Following Ofsted informing the DfE, it has indicated that it will issue a non-statutory Improvement Notice to the Council, followed by the appointment of a DfE Improvement Advisor.

9.2. Non-statutory intervention includes: the provision of external consultancy, advisory or peer support, often from another council; the establishment of improvement boards (with or without an independent chair); enhanced monitoring and challenge; and the issuing of non-statutory Improvement Notices which have often been used to underpin a package of intervention (made up of some or all of the above). The Council has powers to establish an Improvement Board and appoint an Independent Chair under the General Power of Competence (Localism Act 2011). As the Improvement Board will be comprised of officers, councillors, and independent persons, it cannot be a formal Committee or Sub-Committee of the Council (section 101 Local Government Act 1972). This means that the Improvement Board is advisory and assists the executive powers of the Council, through the powers delegated to the Executive Director, and the political and scrutiny powers of the Council, through the powers delegated to Policy Committee and the ACE Committee (Adults, Social Care and Education Committee).

9.3. The Council is in the process of setting up an Improvement Board, a Council requirement of the decision to transition Children's Services back into the Council. A report recommending the Terms of Reference and appointment process for an Independent Chair was presented to Council in June. The Independent Chair of the Board has been appointed and the DfE Improvement Advisor will be a member of the Improvement Board.

9.4. These legal implications have been agreed by Michael Graham, Monitoring Officer.

9.5. Financial Implications

10.1 A resource request for £804,730 was made to the Company and the Council to support the rapid improvement plan for a period of 6 months. This resource included, additional support for case management systems, additional front line practitioners and an improvement lead. These posts have now been filled. Funding was allocated from children's services reserves, grant funding and RBC's Delivery Fund.

10. Timetable for Implementation

10.1. The Children's Services Single Agency Rapid Improvement Plan concluded on 8th September 2025, with 44 of the 48 actions completed to date. The remaining actions have been

incorporated into Service Plans for ongoing monitoring and improvement or progressed as part of the next phase of enhancements within Children's Services.

10.2. The joint agency plan will continue to be overseen by the Partnership Improvement Group, chaired by the DfE Improvement Advisor.

10.3. Progress will be assessed through a monitoring visit by Ofsted in November 2025.

11. Background Papers

11.1. None.

Appendix Two