

# *'Focus on the Fundamentals'*

## Quality Assurance Framework

January 2026



## About this document

|                                      |   |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| <b>Title</b>                         | 'Focus on the Fundamentals' Quality Assurance Framework   |
| <b>Purpose</b>                       | The purpose of this framework is to provide guidance in relation to how and why we undertake our quality assurance activity and ensure a learning culture based on findings |
| <b>Replaces</b>                      | Quality Assurance Framework May 2025  |
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| <b>Stored</b>                        | Tri X   |



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# 1. Our Vision

In Bolton, we want to give all our children the best possible start in life, so that they have every chance to succeed, be safe and happy.

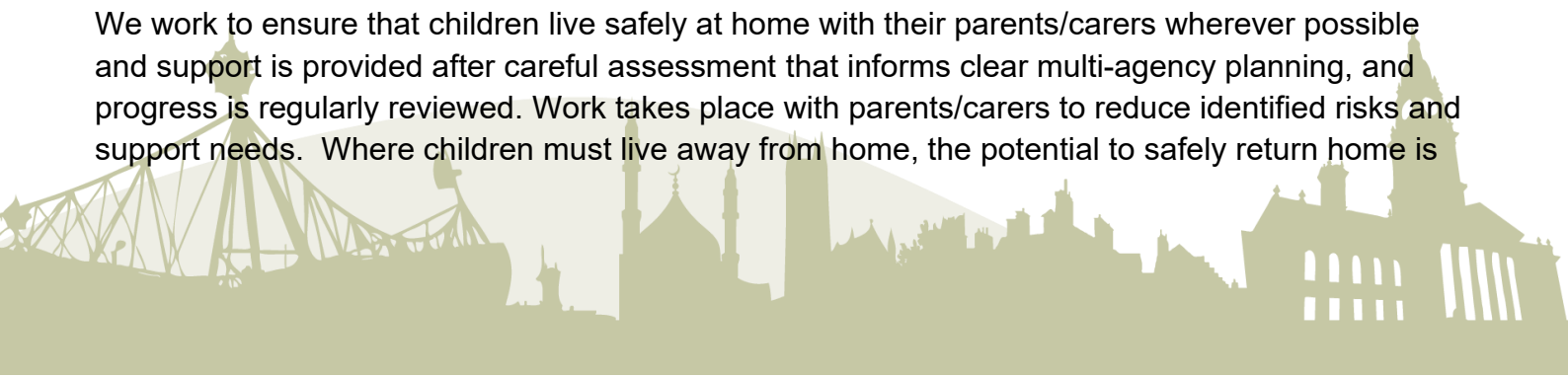
Our Vision is underpinned by six outcomes for the borough:

The image displays six outcome cards arranged in a 2x3 grid. Each card has a colored header with an icon and a grey body with text. The outcomes are: Start Well (teal header, ABC icon), Live Well (pink header, family icon), Age Well (green header, elderly couple icon), Prosperous (orange header, buildings icon), Clean and Green (blue header, plant icon), and Safe, strong and Distinctive (yellow header, group icon).

| Outcome                             | Description   |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| <b>Start Well</b>                   | Our children get the best possible start in life, so that they have every chance to succeed and be happy.   |
| <b>Live Well</b>                    | The happiness and wellbeing of our residents is improved, so that they can live healthy, fulfilling lives for longer.   |
| <b>Age Well</b>                     | Older people in Bolton stay healthier for longer, and feel more connected with their communities.   |
| <b>Prosperous</b>                   | Businesses want to work and invest in the borough and through their corporate social responsibility maximise social value opportunities, whilst creating good inclusive and sustained employment across the system. |
| <b>Clean and Green</b>              | Our environment is protected and improved, so that more people enjoy it, care for it and are active in it.  |
| <b>Safe, strong and Distinctive</b> | Stronger, cohesive, more confident communities in which people feel safe, welcome, and connected.   |

Bolton Council is committed to continuous improvement, ensuring services deliver the best outcomes for children, young people, and families. This Quality Assurance Framework aligns with Bolton's overarching **Children and Young People's Strategy** [currently under review] and **Children's Directorate Plan 2025-28** clearly setting out our mission, vision, ambition, and the pathway for achieving continuous improvement.

We work to ensure that children live safely at home with their parents/carers wherever possible and support is provided after careful assessment that informs clear multi-agency planning, and progress is regularly reviewed. Work takes place with parents/carers to reduce identified risks and support needs. Where children must live away from home, the potential to safely return home is



thoroughly considered in a timely way. All of this intervention is documented in clear case recording.

## 2. Our Practice Approach

Bolton Children's services are dedicated to having a positive impact on the lives of Bolton's children, young people and their families via high quality effective practice. The way in which we achieve this is informed by our practice approach.

Our practice approach provides our staff and partners with a framework for the way we work with children, young people and their families and is underpinned by our corporate values and behaviours. Our practice approach is informed by 5 key practice principles:

- Relational Practice
- Restorative Practice
- Strengths-based Practice
- Multi-agency working
- Child-centred Practice

In Bolton our practice principles support working with children, families, each other, and across the partnership restoratively, relationally, child-centred, and strengths based. These practice principles serve as a foundation for meaningful and sustainable intervention and change.

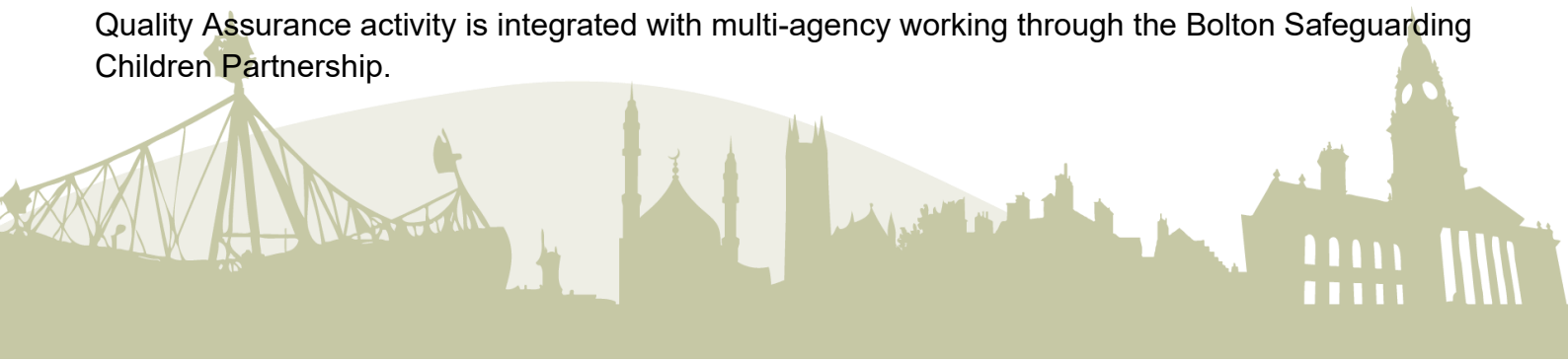
Our Quality Assurance framework is aligned with our practice approach focusing on building trusting relationships, repairing harm, and creating a culture of shared responsibility, ensuring the application of restorative and relational practice to quality assurance activity.

Quality Assurance activity is undertaken alongside practitioners to support a culture of learning and improvement rather than blame. Case Audits are collaborative, fostering relationships with staff and managers whilst providing both high support and high challenge.

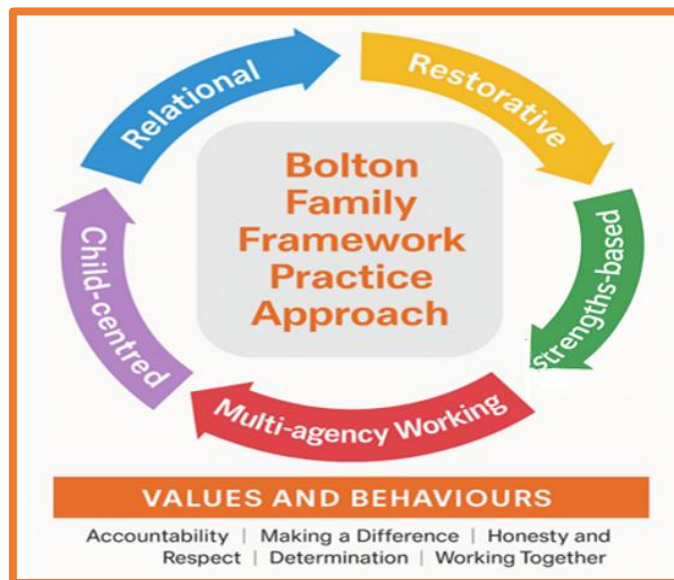
Quality Assurance activity is child-centred prioritising children's lived experiences, impact of intervention, and outcomes; ensuring their voices and those of their families/carers are heard and central to assessment, planning, and review.

Quality Assurance activity encourages and supports staff development, continuous learning, and practice improvement, via reflection, building on strengths, and constructive feedback. Where concerns are identified in children's records, prompt 'close the loop' action is taken to secure positive outcomes.

Quality Assurance activity is integrated with multi-agency working through the Bolton Safeguarding Children Partnership.



This Quality Assurance Framework should be read and implemented in conjunction with our **Practice Standards** and **Practice Approach**, as the three pillars of our organisational learning culture.



### 3. Our Values and Behaviours

Our Values and Behaviours framework supports our Bolton 2030 Vision and Practice Approach. Our values guide our decision making and the expected behaviour we should all display.

|  |   |
|--|---|
|  <b>Accountability</b><br>take responsibility for actions,<br>stand by decisions...                     | <b>Determination</b><br>don't give up, remain positive and<br>open to new ideas...<br>         |
|  <b>Making a difference</b><br>work to a high standard, provide a<br>quality service, keep it simple... | <b>Working together</b><br>share knowledge, support,<br>collaborate for better outcomes...<br> |
|  <b>Honesty and respect</b><br>be truthful, open, fair, treat others<br>how you want to be treated...   | ...we will be one council,<br>building an effective and<br>dynamic organisation.  |



## 4. Quality Assurance and Our Practice Standards

Our Practice Standards function as a guide outlining expectations for our high -quality practice. They support best practice, highlight what best practice looks and feels like, and enable consistency in practice. Our Practice Standards inform how we see ourselves, our priorities, and resource allocation required to achieve our vision, mission, and ambition.

Nationally, there are Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) which are reportable to Government which then inform Ofsted inspection framework application when inspecting Local Authorities. Our practice standards inform our Quality Assurance Framework and Quality Assurance activity to help us understand the quality behind some of those KPI's.

This Quality Assurance Framework also aligns with Ofsted's Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) framework. It ensures that the key areas of focus such as the quality and impact of social work practice, leadership oversight, and the effectiveness of services for children in need of help and protection - are systematically monitored and addressed. Our Quality Assurance activity supports the ongoing readiness for inspection and demonstrates a culture of continuous learning, reflection, and improvement, in line with Ofsted's expectations of a 'self-aware' and 'self-improving' local authority.

Ofsted criteria for what good looks like can be viewed here. [Inspecting local authority children's services - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/inspecting-local-authority-childrens-services).

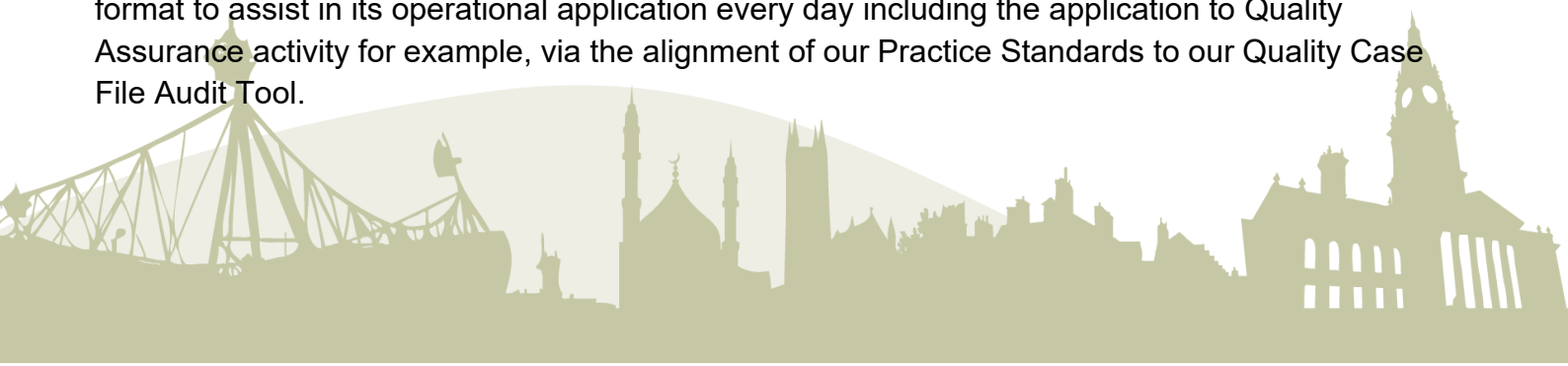
Our Practice Standards are our shared commitment to the children and families we work with, each other, our practice approach, and our values and behaviours that all define what it is to be part of the 'Bolton Family.'

Of utmost importance our Practice Standards serve as a practical tool to enable social work to thrive, with the aim of providing the workforce with confidence and assistance in delivering best practice every day.

In Bolton our Practice Standards have been structured with a 'Focus on the Fundamentals' of social work practice in mind. These fundamentals being:

- Practice Standard 1 - Assessment
- Practice Standard 2 - Planning, Review & Meetings
- Practice Standard 3 - Direct Work with Children & Visits
- Practice Standard 4 - Management Oversight & Supervision
- Practice Standard 5 - Case Recording

Each practice standard outlines expectations in terms of best practice in a digestible checklist format to assist in its operational application every day including the application to Quality Assurance activity for example, via the alignment of our Practice Standards to our Quality Case File Audit Tool.



## 5. The Purpose of Quality Assurance

The purpose of Quality assurance is to provide a structured and systematic approach to the monitoring and evaluation of practice to improve services for children. Our Quality Assurance has a clear child-centred approach focusing on children and their families' experiences, progress, and outcomes and whether our intervention has made a difference.

Quality Assurance enables a clear line of sight for leaders and managers to aid in the understanding of the effectiveness of services and the impact of practice in terms of improving outcomes for our children and their families. Our Quality Assurance assists in knowing ourselves, where our strengths are and where there are areas for development, reflection, and learning to continuously improve practice and achieve better outcomes for our children and families.

Quality assurance supports and informs a culture of learning and continuous improvement by analysing practice against agreed standards, statutory requirements, legislation, and practice guidance leading to practice improvement activity and reflection. Quality Assurance also helps identify areas of strengths in our practice.


Quality Assurance is not solely focused on compliance; it is crucially about outcomes. Our Quality Assurance is restorative and relational with a focus on improving outcomes for children and their families and the quality of our practice via working in partnership with our workforce to encourage and support learning and development. This Quality Assurance Framework:

- Provides a clear structure for monitoring and improving practice.
- Ensures accountability across all levels of the organisation.
- Uses Quality Assurance findings to inform workforce development and practice improvement.
- Embeds a whole-system approach, working collaboratively with partners, practitioners, and children and their families.
- Ensures that Bolton's practice standards are consistently met.

This framework is reviewed annually to ensure it aligns with best practice and statutory requirements.

## 6. How do we measure quality?

For consistency in measuring the quality and impact of Quality Assurance activity Bolton has adapted the OFSTED judgements from the Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACs) (2022) [Inspecting local authority children's services - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inspecting-local-authority-childrens-services):

- Outstanding
  - Meets good
  - Does not yet meet good
- 

- Inadequate

(Further review of the Quality Assurance Framework will reflect Bolton's response to Ofsted's planned revisions to the ILACS framework from April 2026. Ofsted's intention is to align inspections with the broader reforms happening across children's social care and to reflect the changing expectations on children's services, which include a greater focus on supporting children and their families to stay together, get the help they need, be safe and have stable and loving homes).

## 7. Roles and responsibilities



All practitioners are expected to adhere to and keep up to date with legislation, best practice guidance, and internal and local procedures & policies. Practitioners are expected to apply Bolton's practice standards to their daily practice and quality assurance activity. Bolton have an active membership with Research in Practice and practitioners are encouraged to enrol. Qualified Social Workers are also required to comply with Social Work England Standards and professional conduct.

Auditors are expected to provide a rationale for their grading which must be proportionate and evidence based. Crucially auditors must also identify strengths on which to build upon and clearly outline what they would like to have seen for the grading to be higher including the identifying challenges and barriers to good service delivery.



## 8. Quality Assurance activity

Our Quality Assurance activity is flexible and dynamic. Quality assurance in Bolton goes beyond traditional audits. It involves the continuous collection and analysis of data and intelligence that help us understand the quality of our practice, the effectiveness of our systems and, most importantly, the impact of our work with children and families.



Quality assurance includes analysis of service information across the whole system including; Early Help, the Integrated Front Door, Referral and Assessment, Safeguarding, Children Looked After and Care Leaver Teams, Children with Disabilities team, Complex Safeguarding, the Conference and Reviewing Service, LADO, Fostering and Placement Services, and Commissioned Services ensuring a comprehensive and holistic picture of practice quality and impact.

### **Performance Data**

As part of our performance framework data is provided via our Policy and Performance Team to enable services to measure their performance against key performance indicators (KPI's), regional neighbours, and statistical neighbours; this supports system and process development and review

to ensure they are the most effective in achieving positive outcomes for our children and families. Strategic Leads report the same into bi-monthly Assurance and Improvement Board Meetings.

## **Audit**

All audit activity is strengths-based with a focus on celebrating and highlighting positive practice whilst identifying learning and development needs.

SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timely) actions are set following audit, with updates tracked by the Quality Assurance Manager/Officer. Audit findings inform service/practice improvement plans via overview reports to governance meetings.

The Quality Assurance Manager/Officer report audit findings into bi-monthly Assurance and Improvement Board Meetings.

### *6 weekly Quality Case File Audits*

The Quality Case File Audit Tool is found on the Liquid Logic integrated children's system in the forms tab. This tool is informed by and aligned to our practice standards and has been designed to audit the quality of a case file with consideration given to compliance.

The Quality Case File audit tool that is held on the child's file includes an area for feedback from the child/young person and parent/carer as well as feedback from the allocated social worker and other involved professionals including partner agencies.

Practitioners engage in reflective discussion with the auditor, and auditors provide clear, constructive feedback based on evidence. Audits are completed 'WITH' practitioners to encourage learning and development as opposed to done 'TO' practitioners.

Sampling for Quality Case File Audit is stratified, ensuring a proportionate sample and representation from all service areas.

## *Moderation*

6 weekly audit moderation is undertaken on a sample of quality case file audits based on the number of audits completed that cycle. Senior leaders will review quality case file audits to determine whether the applied grading is evidence based and ensure quality case file audits highlight strengths. Any learning is fed back to the auditor. Good examples of audit and quality case files will be shared by the Principal Social Worker. Moderation is captured on case files to evidence senior manager oversight.



### 6 weekly Thematic Audits

Thematic Audits are subject to purposive sampling informed by performance reports and ChAT tool insights, to address identified priorities, issues, and areas requiring focused attention. Once a theme is selected the thematic audit pool, consisting of Heads of Service and Strategic Leads, undertake audits using a responsive methodology specific to theme.

### Multi-Agency Audits (safeguarding partnership)

Multi-agency audits are utilised to drive systemic learning and practice improvement bringing together professionals from social care, health, and policy and relevant partner agencies to



evaluate impact of practice and multi-agency working beyond that of procedural and statutory compliance. Multi-agency audits encourage co-production, information sharing, continuous learning, and collaboration in practice improvement, feeding directly into workforce development and strategic planning. Governance from the safeguarding partnership ensures findings translate into measurable change and improved outcomes.

### Direct Observations of Practice

Practice observation is a Quality Assurance method utilised to focus on good quality work and areas requiring development and will result in an action plan that is then reviewed in personal reflective supervision.

Managers and Advanced Practitioners must directly observe an area of practice for each of their supervisees at least once a year. 6 monthly practice weeks are the ideal time to undertake this activity. Direct observation of practice focuses on one of the following areas of practice:

- Direct work with children.
- Collaboration with parents/carers.
- Partnership and multi-agency working (e.g. Core Group, Child Protection Conference, Child Looked After Review).
- For managers responsible for casework supervision there is an aspiration that their supervision and/or management oversight is subject to practice observation annually.

Senior managers are also involved in observation of practice. They walk the floor regularly, talk to staff, listen and observe, sit in on interviews with children and parents and report back to the Quality Assurance Manager/Officer any themes that may arise.

## **Feedback**

### *Children and Family Feedback*

As part of our Quality Case File Audits feedback is sought from children and their families where appropriate to ensure accountability, understand their experiences, and inform practice improvement and services development.

Other forums/mechanisms for Children and Family Feedback:


- Voice 4 U - Children in Care Council
- Care Leavers Forum
- Looked After Children Reviews
- Child Protection Conferences
- Information and Advisory Service
- Formal survey's e.g. Have Your Say – online surveys
- Voiceability - Advocacy and Independent Visitors
- IRO and CP chair visits

### *Workforce Feedback*

Workforce feedback is important in Bolton and there are multiple mechanisms in place to facilitate this Quality Assurance activity to encourage relationship building and strong communication, ensuring a culture that promotes psychological safety and practitioners feeling valued. Feedback supports staff retention as well as aids in the development of systems that ensure our workforce are listened to and have an opportunity to shape services in Bolton.

Child Protection Conference Chairs and Independent Reviewing Officers escalate cases via the dispute resolution process when practice issues are identified. These are reviewed by the relevant team and/or senior leader/s, and resolutions are monitored by the Performance Board.

Quarterly Principal Social Worker (PSW) practitioner forums are held across the service, these forums are practitioner led with no fixed agenda. Practitioners can share their views regarding



organisation culture, systems, processes, worries, and good news stories. Feedback is collated and presented to Directorate Leadership Team on a 6-weekly basis via PSW attendance.

Children's services staff engagement sessions take place quarterly; these sessions focus on sharing the progress of Directorate / Assistant Directorate plans/strategy with the workforce and operationalising the same and provide an additional opportunity for practitioners to network, communicate and build relationships across.

The voice of the workforce board, a small practitioner group was established in May 2025 with representatives from each service area across the directorate. The Voice of the Workforce Board is led by the Director to ensure there is direct line of sight with practitioners and enable the Director to hear directly on any workforce issues.

Task and Finish groups with a specific system and/or practice improvement focus are utilised and ensure representation across the workforce to encourage collaboration and coproduction, with a focus on doing 'WITH' and not 'TO' when developing systems and process'.

Bolton also utilise the Local Government Association's annual Employer Standards Survey (Health Check) which is administered independently annually to provide a mechanism for practitioners to provide feedback regarding their role and organisation. This provides insight into workers experiences of working in Bolton and informs areas for improvement and where there are strengths to build upon.

## **Compliments & Complaints**

In Bolton we value compliments and complaints and a feedback mechanism to inform a culture of learning and continuous improvement. Whilst most complaints are dealt within via our corporate complaint's procedure a Children's Services Statutory Complaints and Compliments Procedure is under development and will inform senior leadership corrective action, learning opportunities, and ensure learning is shared across the relevant services restoratively to enable reflection and learning.

The Corporate Complaints Team are responsible for identifying any emerging trends or systemic practice issues. Specific meetings are convened to consider lessons learnt from complex complaints. This process will be supported by the development of a Children's Services Statutory Complaint's and Compliments Procedure

## **Reviews**

Reviews in the form of Peer Review, Safeguarding Partnership commissioned reviews, JTAI Reviews, and Internal Learning reviews establish whether our intervention in making a difference to the lived experience of our children and their families and if we have achieved positive impact and outcomes.

## **Leadership**



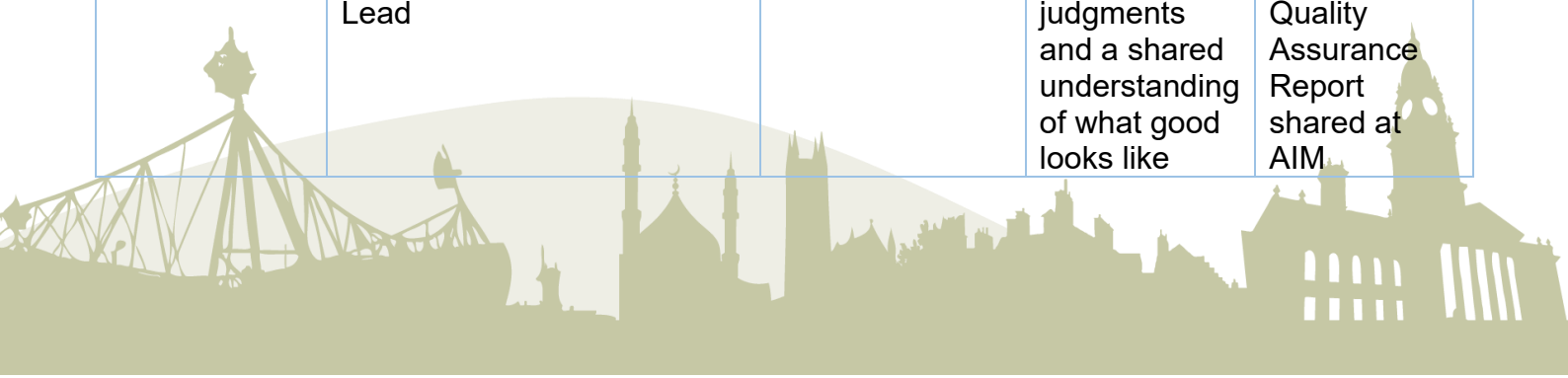
Management oversight and Supervision are crucial in the development of a learning culture providing a mechanism for reflection, discussion, support and challenge. Management oversight and Supervision is one of Bolton’s fundamentals and benefits practitioners, the organisation, and those who access services. Case supervision takes place monthly in the form of Case Reflective Supervision or Check in Supervision. Personal reflective supervision also takes place bi-monthly. Effective leadership and supervision is supported by relationships and managers and practitioners are encouraged to communicate openly and effectively to support relationship building outside of formal supervision.

Managers and practitioners review audit actions in supervision to ensure issues are addressed and the Focus on the Fundamentals Framework is implemented. The Quality Assurance Manager/Officer tracks and monitors completion of actions and reports to management on this.

A number of panels and meetings consider specific planning decisions on cases or services. Panels may be chaired by an independent chair or by a senior manager, and their membership will include staff with relevant specialist knowledge. The Panels scrutinise practice and planning decisions and provide support and challenge to the case holder and line manager. Panels may also determine access to resources which are beyond the delegated authority of the line manager.

## 9. Quality Assurance activity at a glance

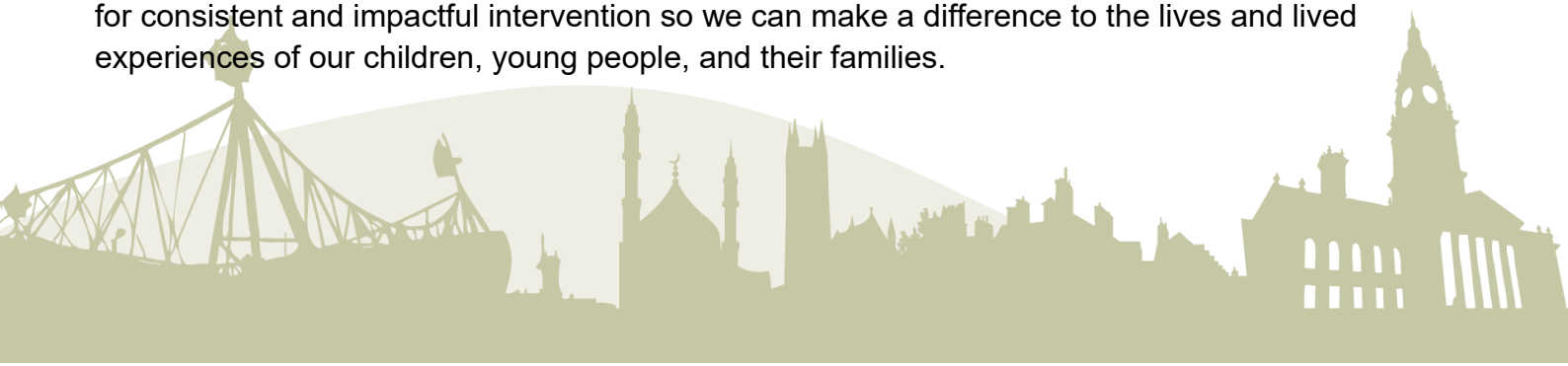
| QA Activity                      | Who?  | Frequency | Outcome   | Reporting Mechanism   |
|----------------------------------|---|-----------|---|---|
| <b>Quality Case File Audits</b>  | Team Managers/IRO/CP chairs/Aps/Director/Assistant Director                   | 6-weekly  | Identifies practice strengths & areas for improvement                                     | 6 weekly, Quarterly, and Annual Quality Assurance Report shared at Assurance and Improvement Meeting (AIM)<br><br>Supervision |
| <b>Moderation of Case Audits</b> | QA Manager/Officer, Principal Social Worker, Heads of Service, Strategic Lead | 6-weekly  | Ensures consistency in audit judgments and a shared understanding of what good looks like | 6 weekly, Quarterly, and Annual Quality Assurance Report shared at AIM  |



|  |   |                  |   |   |
|--|---|------------------|---|---|
| <b>Multi-Agency Audits</b>               | Safeguarding Partnership  | Quarterly        | Strengthen partnership working                                | Shared via Bolton Safeguarding Children Partnership and Quality Assurance Reports |
| <b>Thematic Audits</b>                   | Heads of Service/Strategic Lead   | 6-weekly         | Provides deep-dive analysis into priority areas               | 6 weekly, Quarterly, and Annual Quality Assurance Report shared at AIM            |
| <b>Staff &amp; Service User Feedback</b> | Quality Assurance Manager/Team Managers/ Heads of Service/Strategic Leads | Ongoing          | Captures experiences of frontline staff, children, & families | 6 weekly, Quarterly, and Annual Quality Assurance Report shared at AIM            |
| <b>Practice Observations</b>             | Team Managers/ Heads of Service/Strategic Leads                           | Annually         | Evaluates the quality of direct work with children            | Annual Quality Assurance Report shared at AIM                                     |
| <b>Compliment and Complaints Reports</b> | QA Team   | Quarterly/Annual | Gathers feedback on how services are experienced              | Quarterly Annual Quality Assurance Report shared at AIM                           |

## 10. Measuring & Sharing Learning

Bolton Children’s Services are committed to continuous improvement in service delivery. A focus on the fundamentals will ensure we do the basics well to better practice and provide a foundation for consistent and impactful intervention so we can make a difference to the lives and lived experiences of our children, young people, and their families.



To focus on the fundamentals, a cycle of learning opportunities were introduced from May 2025 linked to findings from thematic audits, quality case file audits and informed by best practice guidance.

### *Learning opportunities*

- Workforce wide virtual breakfast briefings sessions to communicate audit findings from the previous audit cycle with a particular focus on practice improvement
- Workforce wide virtual lunch time learning sessions to communicate audit findings from the previous audit cycle with a particular focus on practice improvement
- Workforce wide 6 weekly 7-minute briefings to communicate audit findings from the previous audit cycle
- Bi-annual Practice Weeks. There are typically opportunities to attend thematic learning sessions, share learning and undertake thematic audits. In 2025 we had a focus on 'workforce wellbeing' and 'reconnecting with our practice principles' including revisiting and operationalising the Bolton Family Framework.
- Quarterly Staff Engagement Sessions.
- Each area of the service holds service specific development sessions alongside team meetings and managers meetings.
- Focused Practice Improvement (FPI) Workshops take place on an individual level each quality case file audit cycle for practitioners and managers with audit gradings of 'Does not yet meet Good' and 'Inadequate'. Any urgent concerns must be immediately reported to managers and Heads of Service.

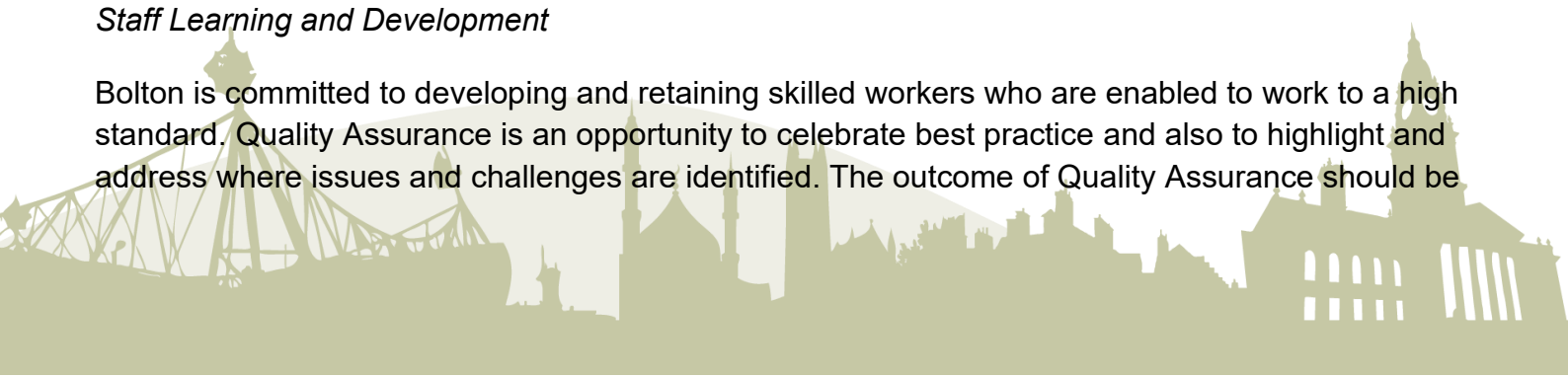
### *Closing the Loop*

This framework helps us to demonstrate how children and young people and their families experience services in Bolton. We must be able to evidence the impact of the work that we do to improve outcomes for children, young people, and their families.

To ensure effective learning is taking place and being embedded following quality assurance activity, the PSW team undertake dip samples across the service following learning opportunities. Findings are reported into Assurance and Improvement Board Meetings about what is working well and also any barriers for best practice.

### *Staff Learning and Development*

Bolton is committed to developing and retaining skilled workers who are enabled to work to a high standard. Quality Assurance is an opportunity to celebrate best practice and also to highlight and address where issues and challenges are identified. The outcome of Quality Assurance should be



discussed on an individual level during personal reflective supervision to inform training and development needs. Records capture the worker's response to feedback, planned actions, and any support or training offered. Bolton also have a training offer to support proactive learning and development.

## 11. Related Documents

Bolton's Children and Young People's Strategy

Quality Case File Audit Tool

Thematic Audit Tools

Bolton's Practice Approach

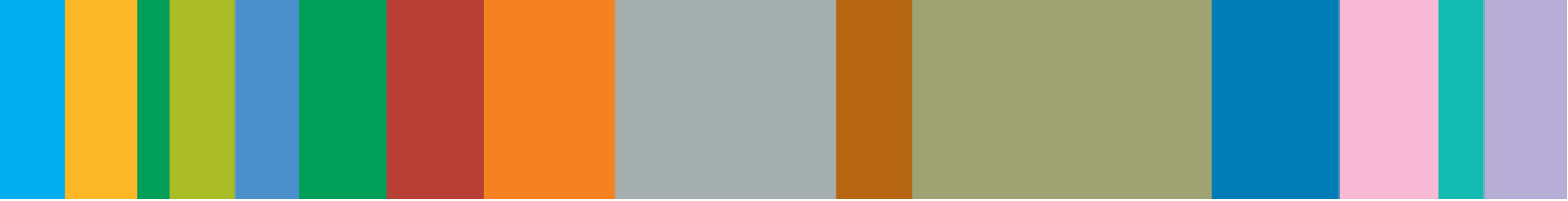
Bolton Practice Standards

Multi-Agency Quality Assurance protocol

Performance indicators and ChAT tool overview

Assurance and Improvement Meeting terms of reference





*Reviewed and updated January 2026*

