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Mrs Anne Bristow
Deputy Chief Executive
London Borough of Barking and Dagenham
Town Hall
1, Town Square
Barking IG11 7LU

Dear Mrs Bristow,

Focused visit to London Borough of Barking and Dagenham children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Barking and Dagenham children's services on 7 and 8 March 2018. The inspectors were Louise Warren, HMI, and John Roughton, HMI. The quality assurance manager was Sean Tarpey, SHMI.

Inspectors considered the local authority's arrangements at the 'front door' for children who need help and protection in accordance with the Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services framework (ILACS). Specifically, they considered contacts, referrals and decision-making within the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). They also considered transfers to early help, immediate child protection enquiries and the quality of assessments for children in need.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers, managers, and a number of partner agencies. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information, as well as children's case records.

Overview

Within Barking and Dagenham, there is strong corporate leadership to improve services to meet the diverse needs of children and their families. During this focused visit, inspectors found that this scrutiny enables better quality social work practice to embed. Senior leaders know the service well, as shown by their recent self-evaluation. Inspectors found evidence of sound social work practice in the MASH and

assessment service, both of which have benefited from innovative actions to secure a more stable workforce. In the cases audited and in all other work considered, the local authority had acted appropriately to safeguard children and keep them safe.

The MASH has been reconfigured and works effectively to safeguard children. Partners are well engaged, which ensures timely information-sharing, the consistent application of thresholds and proportionate responses for children and their families who need help and support. Managers take appropriate decisions to safeguard children, and responses to immediate child protection concerns are timely. Children and families are appropriately referred to early help services, where a wide range of staff and resources are available to provide help and support. Inspectors noted delays for a small number of children in the sharing of information before early help services are offered. However, effective systems are in place once children are provided with the help they need.

Work that goes through the MASH and into the assessment teams is well integrated and managed. Strategy discussions and child protection enquiries are timely and lead to effective action to safeguard children. Assessments are mostly thorough, incorporating the views of children and their families, and the diversity of their needs is appropriately considered. Management oversight is well embedded in the MASH, although more variable in the assessment service. However, all staff reported that their workloads are manageable, they have access to good quality training and are well supported so they can provide children and their families with effective direct help and services.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

The local authority needs to take action to address and monitor the following areas of practice:

- the quality of referrals from partner agencies is not always comprehensive enough to identify the level of professional concern. This has a detrimental effect on some children as there is a delay in the delivery of services to them
- the use of qualitative information and auditing to inform practice developments does not yet drive and monitor further practice improvements
- management oversight and supervision of case work in the assessment service are not consistently recorded in case records. This inhibits the understanding of what is working well to improve outcomes for children and measure whether such progress is sufficiently timely
- the thresholds between statutory services and early help services should be monitored during the bedding in of the new early help structures.

Findings

- Since the last Ofsted inspection in May 2014, senior leaders and partners have retained a strong focus to improve social work practice. Previous areas of concern within the MASH and assessment service have been tackled effectively. For example, there are more timely assessments of children's needs, a fuller participation by relevant professionals at strategy discussions, and the appropriate use of police protection for children who need immediate help and protection. Improvements in the recruitment and retention of social workers are beginning to stabilise the workforce, enabling more consistency in social work practice, and fewer changes of social workers for children.
- The recent changes to early help services, and the very recent investment and implementation of a new electronic case record system, demonstrate promise and improvement. However, these changes are still too recent to be able to fully evaluate impact and outcomes.
- Within the cases audited by the local authority, inspectors did not find any children at risk of harm, and appropriate decisions had been taken to safeguard children. However, some local authority thematic audits are not comprehensive enough. For example, some assessments did not fully capture the views of the child or their families, or address all risks. Some plans are not specific enough to improve outcomes for children. More recent work seen by inspectors is showing signs of improvement to practice. For example, more recent assessments are focused on a strengths-and-risks-based approach and the voice of the child is more consistently informing the work that needs to be done.
- The MASH model has been strengthened since the previous inspection. Partners benefit from being co-located and most work considered by inspectors evidenced that timely information sharing is in place. Thresholds are consistently applied, and a strong system of rating the severity of presenting risks by social care managers means appropriate and timely action is taken to safeguard children. Workloads are manageable and staff reported to inspectors that they have enough time to do their work thoroughly. There are additional specialist social workers who link with schools and are available to visit children and families quickly to offer help and support.
- Multi-agency referrals considered by inspectors are not always clear about the nature of concerns and safeguarding risks to children due to limited referral information. Consent is not always being routinely gained by referrers. When consent is gained in the MASH, it is not always clearly recorded in case records. Managers are confident that the new electronic management system will provide opportunities to improve practice in this area.
- Children and families are appropriately referred to early help and intervention services. Inspectors observed in a small number of cases that there was delay for some children being considered at the newly instigated daily triage meeting, which leads to support and help not being provided swiftly enough. Some of the delays are a consequence of the police not sending lower level risk notifications

through in a timely manner. However, once cases are allocated to social workers, good systems are in place to assess the needs of children.

- Within the new community solutions division, early help services are able to offer staff and a wide range of resources to engage with families and meet the complex and diverse needs of children. Thresholds to step up and step down to early help were appropriate in the cases considered by inspectors. As this is a new service, the local authority is aware that the thresholds between early help and statutory services will require consistent management oversight to ensure that they remain appropriate and helpful to children.
- There are strong transitional arrangements in place between the emergency duty team and the day service. Information is managed well to ensure that all risks are known, so that children receive the help and support they need.
- Decisions to accommodate children in cases seen by inspectors are appropriate and timely for the child's circumstances. Police protection orders are used appropriately and only where necessary. This is an improvement on previous practice.
- Strategy discussions are timely and almost all cases considered by inspectors were well attended by relevant professionals. Where professionals do not attend, social workers appropriately follow up on actions with partner agencies to ensure that all risks for children are known and plans to mitigate risk are in place.
- Where decisions are made to carry out section 47 enquiries, children and families are visited quickly and their views sought to ensure appropriate decision-making is in place to progress the case to initial child protection conferences. Risks are clearly understood and this leads to appropriate plans to safeguard children.
- Designated officer arrangements are well understood across the partnership and referrals and consultations are effectively managed. Strong practice was seen in promoting wider safeguarding understanding within a local mosque to improve safer care for children.
- Management oversight and supervision of case work in the MASH are clear and embedded, although more variable in the assessment service due to previous management vacancies. Staff report that they enjoy working in Barking and Dagenham children's services as there is a supportive culture, open access to management advice and appropriate training available to them.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning your next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Louise Warren

Her Majesty's Inspector