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Dear Ms Allegretti

Focused visit to Barking and Dagenham local authority children's services

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic.

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Barking and Dagenham local authority children's services on 26 and 27 May 2021. The visit was carried out by Kate Malleson, Louise Hocking, Caroline Walsh, Tom Anthony and Jon Bowman, all of whom are Her Majesty's Inspectors.

The methodology for this visit was in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. However, the delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. This visit was carried out fully by remote means, using video calls for discussions with social workers, managers, leaders and partners, carers and children. The lead inspector and the director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The contribution to decision-making by health and police partners and the pace of improvement in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH).
- The timely access to effective early help and the consistent application of thresholds, both into and out of this service.

- The offer and take-up of return home interviews to children in care who go missing, so that information is gathered and used to minimise risk and to inform safety planning.
- The quality and impact of services to support care leavers and to help them to prepare for adulthood, with a specific focus on their emotional and physical health and well-being.

Findings

- The pandemic has had a profound impact on the pre-existing levels of significant deprivation, adversity and complex need in this increasingly diverse borough. Leaders and managers quickly got to grips with the challenges and prioritised helping and protecting the most vulnerable children and families. A growing number of families are experiencing the effects of cumulative stress and, as a result, are exhibiting a high level of need. This has led to an unprecedented and increasing demand on children's services. The local authority has responded to this escalating demand with significant investment and by increasing the number of social workers, but the capacity to respond effectively remains stretched. Staff have been supported well throughout the pandemic by collaborative and compassionate leaders and managers who acted decisively, ensuring that staff moved nimbly, safely and effectively to online working.
- Threshold decisions about whether children's needs require a statutory service are mostly appropriate, although some inconsistency remains. When children's needs escalate, or their circumstances deteriorate, the decision to step up from early help for a statutory response is appropriate. For a few children, however, the decision is made too late, and these children continue to experience significant harm. Likewise, for the majority of children who are stepped down to early help, the decision is appropriate. However, for a small minority of families, there is a waiting list or delay before they receive help. Leaders sought an independent review of the early help service and they are fully aware of the current deficiencies. They are taking corrective action to secure improved oversight and to ensure that children receive an appropriate service.
- The MASH was incorporated into children's social care in September 2020 and an improvement plan is in operation. The restructuring and investment are strengthening and improving the MASH, although the increasing demand means that it is at capacity and under considerable and increasing pressure. The current pace of improvement is not sufficient to ensure that decisions for all children are consistently well informed and lead to effective and timely help and protection. Partner agencies, and health partners in particular, do not routinely contribute to decision-making within the MASH. This limits the effectiveness of decision-making and planning.

- Despite the MASH currently operating largely as a single-agency service, the majority of children referred are protected by timely and suitable decision-making. Parental consent is overridden when necessary. Decision-making at strategy meetings is mostly appropriate, although action planning following the meeting is not always clear or recorded. Police participate in joint investigations when there is clear evidence of harm, such as in cases of physical chastisement.
- Partnership working between children's services and schools is strong. When schools identify vulnerable children, they receive prompt advice and guidance from staff in the MASH. Robust initiatives such as the vulnerable pupil panels, drop-in ('hot') clinics, early help advisers and education improvement partners support schools well to plan additional support and help for vulnerable children who do not meet the threshold for social work intervention. Routine oversight of children missing from education and those who are electively home educated has increased since the beginning of the pandemic.
- Social workers recognise and take account of the different cultures and languages of the children and families in the borough. Interpreters are routinely used. Physical chastisement is commonly practised among some groups in the borough and senior managers have identified the need to work closely with the relevant communities, in addition to the usual child protection arrangements.
- Most children subject to child protection and child in need plans make some progress. Although management oversight has improved, the quality of social work practice is inconsistent and a small minority of children do not experience sufficient improvement in their circumstances. This is particularly apparent for children experiencing neglect. When several children within a family are on plans, their individual experiences and progress are not routinely identified. Children are visited regularly and increasingly these visits are face to face rather than online.
- Senior managers have effective oversight of permanency planning when there is concern about whether children can remain safely within their families. Pre-proceedings work is strong and a well-embedded process ensures that practice runs smoothly. Letters before proceedings are mostly helpful, clear and appropriate in tone. They inform parents of the concerns and explain the changes or improvements that need to happen to divert children from coming into care.
- Most children in care make good progress and they live in stable homes that meet their needs. They live with their brothers and sisters when appropriate and their individual needs are taken into account in decisions. When placements break down, children's feelings are carefully considered in planning decisions and they are thoughtfully and carefully supported to move to new placements.
- However, not all children come into care in a planned way and instead are subject to emergency police protection. This is particularly apparent in cases of parental neglect where children have been left at significant risk. For some of

these children, emergency actions result in additional placement moves within a very short time, which adds to their experiences of trauma and disruption.

- The planning for young babies to enter care is much stronger. Sensitive work by the pre-birth team supports effective consideration of risks to unborn babies. Parents are thoughtfully helped to understand and to meet the needs of their babies, and mother and baby placements are used well. When necessary, cases are progressed swiftly to court so that early decisions can be made about care arrangements. Effective use of family group conferences helps to identify potential carers in the wider family at the earliest opportunity.
- Children in care now benefit from significantly improved timeliness of health assessments and reviews, with appropriate follow-up of their health needs. This is a result of concerted partnership action. Hot clinics provided by child and adolescent mental health services' workers help foster carers to respond well to children's emotional needs and thus to prevent placement breakdowns.
- Foster carers spoke highly of the strong emotional and practical help and support that they have received from social workers and other carers to help them to care for children throughout the pandemic. They particularly value the hub arrangement, which has provided carers and children with opportunities to socialise and play games online and face to face. Together with the opportunity to attend school, this has reduced the negative impact of the pandemic for them.
- Staff at the virtual school have maintained effective oversight of children's learning during the pandemic, including of those who are more vulnerable. Staff have developed bespoke responses to meet individual needs, and progress has been reviewed more frequently for children where there is concern.
- Spending time with families is prioritised so that children can see the people who are important to them. Foster carers have been creative in finding solutions to improve the experiences of children and families when having virtual contact. This has included well-timed sessions to capture the interest of very young children and babies.
- Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children benefit from a positive consideration of their needs and they make good progress. Excellent use of interpreters and specialist support means that they understand what is happening and are involved in decisions that affect their lives.
- Children benefit from the care and support of social workers who know them well. The level of care and support shines through in many children's records. Social workers prioritise their contact with children and are creative about how they maintain relationships, despite the restrictions and limitations of physical visits and virtual working.
- For a large minority of children in care who go missing or who are vulnerable to exploitation, return home interviews are not routinely completed. This means that

the level of risk is not assessed effectively, nor safety planning sufficiently informed.

- A comparatively high proportion of care leavers are in education, employment or training. Senior managers make notable efforts to support young people's education, employment and training aspirations through traineeships with a construction company, in-house apprenticeships and internships.
- Timely mental health services for care leavers are not readily accessible. Care leavers have to access services via their general practitioner, and waiting lists are long for adult services. Care leavers also do not have easy access to specialist support with substance misuse, and their health histories are not available.
- Personal advisers are not provided for children in care until they are almost 18 years old. This is too late to benefit from the specialist knowledge and experience which advisers offer to children as they prepare for adulthood. Although most leaving care advisers are persistent in their efforts to engage young people, support for some young people during the pandemic has been disrupted by staff sickness, changes of adviser and the capacity of the team.
- Leaders and councillors have a good understanding about the further developments that are needed to embed the progress made so far and to ensure a consistently good quality of service for all children. The focus on improvement has continued, despite the challenges of the pandemic. There is a strategic and methodical approach to align services to meet the needs of children more effectively. This is particularly evident in the changes to the MASH and early help services. Despite some improvements and engagement by partners, aspects of partnership working remain weak and are still to have a positive impact on children's experiences.
- The impact of increasing demand on the quality of work with children and families is evident across the service. Senior managers have taken prompt action to mitigate the impact, with plans to add capacity where the demand is greatest. Staff in some services have high and increasing caseloads and some operational managers are covering work for practitioners. Nevertheless, there has been successful recruitment to permanent roles and a reduced reliance on agency staff, which is bringing stability to the workforce overall.
- Despite the challenges of the last year and stretched workforce capacity, staff feel well supported, they are highly motivated, enjoy their work and speak very favourably of accessible and approachable managers. Senior managers have taken effective steps to protect the health and well-being of the workforce, offering all staff the opportunity to be vaccinated at the earliest opportunity and providing safe office space for those who are unable to work from home.
- Leaders have developed a more integrated infrastructure which is enabling better oversight of practice. Senior managers are appropriately involved in critical decision-making through the effective use of child in need, child protection and

permanency panels. The revised quality assurance framework is demonstrating some early impact and routine auditing is helping staff at all levels to identify and tackle inconsistent practice across the service.

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

Yours sincerely

Kate Malleson
Her Majesty's Inspector