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Dear Mrs Speechley

Focused visit to Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council children's services on 5 and 6 November 2024. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Jo Warburton and Jan Edwards.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for placement decision-making for older children. They also looked at the impact of leaders on social work practice in their area of the service.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Headline findings

Since the previous inspection in September 2023, when the experience and progress of children in care was judged good, senior leaders have further strengthened the quality and impact of social work practice for older children in care. A culture of child-focused leadership, together with strong political support, is ensuring as corporate parents that they have high aspirations for older children in the council's care. Strategic partnerships have also been strengthened, and there is a whole-council and multi-agency commitment to work together to deliver on the council's sufficiency objectives to create local homes for their children.

A fundamental factor in the sustained service improvement in this practice area is the senior leaders' focus on successfully securing a more stable and skilled workforce following the last inspection. Social workers seen during this visit build meaningful relationships with children and their carers. Supportive frontline managers help social workers to do their jobs well. This is enabling robust oversight of decision-making and effective care planning for older children in care.

Main findings

Social workers and managers in Barnsley keep the child in focus when making decisions about children's lives. They carefully consider the individual needs of older children when they first come into care. They take time to listen to the wishes of older children, exploring and assessing family members and friends as carers where this is in the child's best interests. When children who are aged 16 and 17 present as homeless, social workers sensitively provide them with information which helps them to understand their right to come into care. Social workers undertake joint assessments with housing colleagues if appropriate.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are welcomed on arrival in Barnsley with great care. When children's ages are disputed, and while there are delays in social workers securing age assessments from the National Age Assessment Board, there is an overriding focus on understanding the child's trauma and experience while decisions on whether to accept their claimed age are made. Children move into suitable placements in a timely way. Social workers use interpreters to help children understand how they will be cared for. Social workers are not always able to provide consistent interpreters who have the same dialect as a child. They therefore ensure that children's assessments and plans are translated into language children recognise. This helps children to understand the decisions being made, and how they will be supported.

Disabled older children in care benefit from trusting relationships with their social workers. When disabled children move placements, there is careful planning to help the child prepare for the transition. Social workers are child-centred and understand very well the additional vulnerabilities and barriers disabled children may face. There is a timely multi-agency response when there are concerns that a child is at risk of harm, together with effective safety planning. For older disabled children in care, there is much-improved collaboration with partner agencies since the last inspection. This is now ensuring that children's current and future care needs are identified in preparation for adulthood.

In the children's plans and reviews seen during this visit, older children in care make good progress because of the experiences and support that they receive from their carers, social workers and personal advisers. Older children living with Barnsley foster carers have nurturing, stable homes. An evidence-based programme operates successfully in Barnsley, benefiting both carers and children with an extended support network.

There are a limited number of local placements for older children in care in Barnsley. Most older children who live in children's homes live outside the area. While for some children this has no detriment, other children experience delay in accessing education and services to promote their physical and mental health. Senior leaders militate against this by agreeing bespoke packages of support for individual children while they work to create more in-area homes, including the opening of a further children's home. Senior leaders robustly challenge host integrated care boards to

ensure that children's health needs are met. The virtual school is also an active advocate for children with their counterparts in other local authorities.

There are a very small number of older children living in unregistered children's homes. These placements have been made only in crisis situations. There is a clear and detailed process to monitor these short-term arrangements with increased social work visits and robust senior manager oversight. The commissioning team actively encourages these providers to register with Ofsted while they continue to search for alternative placements with registered providers who can meet children's needs.

Managers and independent reviewing officers (IROs) effectively oversee the care of children who are under the age of 18 and living in supported and semi-independent accommodation. Managers also review their progress to assure themselves that children are continuing to have the right level of support required to meet their needs.

Senior leaders have placed a strong emphasis since the last inspection on putting children and young people at the centre of planning and decisions that affect them. Listening to children and valuing their views strongly underpins social work practice with older children in care. Social workers demonstrate persistence and patience to get to know children and sustain relationships at the child's pace. Social workers visit children regularly, regardless of where they live, in order to understand their experiences and to seek their views.

Children's plans seen during this visit are mostly thorough and analytical and contain appropriate contingency planning. Social workers write to the child and record their interventions through language with the child in mind. This means that should children in later life request to see their files, they are able to understand the rationale behind decisions that social workers and managers made during their time in Barnsley's care. Social workers include the child's voice well, but the views of parents and carers within plans are less clear. Senior leaders are in the process of reviewing the needs assessment which feeds into the pathway plans for older children in care. They recognise that this assessment currently focuses too heavily on children's readiness for independence rather than a fuller analysis of need.

Children in care meetings are timely, well attended by partners and held in person. Older children usually participate in their reviews and benefit from having the support of an advocate. The IROs consider children's views and needs well. Leaders have recently improved the effectiveness of these meetings, which now review the wide-ranging needs of older children by considering both their looked after and education, health and care plans. The IROs provide appropriate oversight and scrutiny of older children's care plans. They regularly visit children in care and use midway reviews with social workers to ensure that there is timely progression of plans. As a result, IROs rarely raise disputes.

Permanence planning is considered in a timely way for older children in care who are in the target age range for this visit. Legal gateway meetings provide effective

oversight of plans when care proceedings are issued. Team managers and heads of service provide comprehensive management oversight at key decision points for older children in care. This includes when children's plans are to return home. Great care is taken to ensure reunification is safe and sustainable. Leaders have also recently introduced no financial detriment for older children leaving care via special guardianship orders. These measures promote children having stability when they no longer require involvement from children's social care.

Social workers prepare later life letters for older children leaving care. Although these are helpful restorative documents, social workers do not always use child-friendly terminology in the letters as well as they could.

Senior leaders in Barnsley have a very clear vision and responsibility towards the children in their care. The director of children's services (DCS) is driving a strong ethos that older children in care have the same needs to be loved, to be cared about and to feel safe as any other child. Inspectors have been able to see how well leaders and politicians in Barnsley are invested in delivering the best services possible for older children who experience care since the last inspection.

There has been significant financial investment in the opening of a hub since our last inspection. This is a new, but very well used resource offering older children and care leavers a range of structured support sessions, activities, drop-in, and informal social events. Older children whom inspectors spoke to when they visited the hub described it as a 'safe haven'. Its opening has transformed the experiences for many older children in care and care leavers.

Corporate parenting board members and statutory partners work effectively together as strong corporate parents to ensure children do not face additional barriers because of their care experience. Older children spoken to during the visit feel valued and feel included in ongoing service developments. The Children in Care Council recently received a highly commended prize at a national participation event. This demonstrates the fulfilled ambition of leaders to listen to their children and amplify their role in shaping services.

Placement sufficiency remains a challenge in Barnsley. Leaders and politicians have a continuing focus on the development of local homes and services for their older children in care. They continue to invest in foster carer recruitment and in the creation of a new children's home and 16+ provision. Leaders want to support children currently living further away to return to Barnsley.

The DCS is committed to incrementally improving the high standards of social work practice delivered to older children, their families and carers. A comprehensive whole-system quality assurance framework ensures senior leaders and political leaders have a thorough understanding of children's experiences, what improvement is required, and their role in enabling this. Audit activity programmes help senior leaders and managers to understand children's experience and the quality of social

workers' practice. While auditors collaborate with social workers during audits, the views of older children and parents are not yet gathered effectively. Leaders are aware of this and are considering how to improve feedback from children and their families to help them fully understand the child's lived experience and the impact of services and interventions.

Senior leaders recognise that the way to improve children's experience and achieve positive outcomes is to invest in their workforce. Their commitment to recruitment, development and retention of the workforce has seen the establishment of the Social Work Academy and practice development hub. Frontline managers provide social workers with regular support and timebound actions in supervision. This guides social workers to better support children and prevents drift in children's plans.

Social workers and IROs stated during this visit that the service feels like a different place since the last inspection. They have experienced a number of leadership and management changes. They say that they now have increased stability and more permanent staff teams. Social workers describe working in Barnsley as being warm and nurturing as well as an appropriately challenging work environment. They report that their caseloads are manageable. Social workers appreciate senior leaders who are visible and caring. Leaders recognise and celebrate the achievements of individual social workers and teams through the distribution of excellence awards.

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

Yours sincerely

Jo Warburton
His Majesty's Inspector