

14 March 2025

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Dear Stephen,

Focused visit to London Borough of Bexley children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Bexley children's services on 13 and 14 February 2025. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Naintara Khosla and Rachel Griffiths.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for services to children in need or those subject to a child protection plan. This visit focused on children aged 16 and 17 who are at risk of homelessness, children who go missing and are at risk of, or subject to, exploitation and the quality of children's experiences in the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline (PLO).

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

Headline findings

At the last inspection, in February 2023, the overall effectiveness of services was judged to be outstanding. There continues to be a steadfast commitment, passion and ambition to deliver highly effective social work services to children and families in Bexley. Political, corporate and senior leaders regularly and meaningfully engage with children and families, ensuring that their views shape services.

Children's and families' needs are well met, through the routine and cohesive response from multi-agency partners. Partnership working is a strength. An impressive performance management infrastructure and a mature and collaborative audit programme provide leaders with an accurate view of the impact of services. Leaders know themselves well and have a good understanding of children's and families' experiences. Senior leaders have successfully responded to the challenges of social worker recruitment with an attractive employment and retention offer and have reduced the use of agency social workers. A stable workforce responds consistently to children's needs. Recruitment, professional development and social work practice are secured in an anti-racist practice framework, enabling children's

identity needs to be met exceptionally well. Social workers are effusive about working in Bexley.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?

- The timeliness of responses to children who are subject to repeat child protection plans and subject to pre-proceedings processes.

Main findings

Skilled and competent social workers mostly identify risk factors for children, including those who are young carers. Social workers swiftly meet with families and see children when there are any allegations of harm. Relevant multi-agency professionals regularly attend strategy meetings; this informs effective decision-making, identifying clear actions to be taken. Child protection investigations are thorough and outcomes are used to inform future plans for families. However, for a small number of children, the professional rationale for not carrying out a child protection medical is not always recorded.

Analytical assessments are informed by the consistent use of genograms and family histories, so that families' unique needs are well understood. The routine inclusion of extended family members in safety planning, formulated in established family network meetings, means that children's needs are met well within their families and communities. Collaborative working with families and the consideration and inclusion of fathers allows children's needs to be mostly met, and risks reduce.

Management oversight is considered and thorough and helps social workers to create effective child in need plans. Plans, whether child in need or child protection, incorporate the information obtained through assessments, family history and multi-agency interventions. Child in need plans progress in a timely manner so children's lives improve through effective multi-agency partnership intervention and regular reviews of timebound actions. However, written plans are not always up to date with the latest information about families' circumstances.

Senior leaders have made progress in improving the pace of change for children in the pre-proceedings phase of the PLO, which was an area for improvement identified at the last inspection. Most children who are subject to pre-proceedings receive effective help from the interventions provided, so that they live in stable home circumstances. However, a small number of children who are the subject of repeat child protection plans remain in pre-proceedings for too long without sustained improvements in their circumstances. Leaders recognise that further work to consistently embed a focus on the child's experience is necessary to further strengthen practice in this area.

Children receive effective help at the right level of need when they are the subject of an assessment, an intervention or child protection planning. Most children are stepped down from child protection plans when this is in their best interests and

when risk decreases. When the threshold for statutory services is not met, the family well-being service provides ongoing effective support.

Social workers are skilled, knowledgeable and passionate about their work with children. They quickly build trusting relationships with children and gain insight into their family's unique cultural and religious influences. Children spend time with social workers, who confidently and empathetically respond to identity and ethnicity needs with creative and culturally competent direct work. Social workers for disabled children understand their needs well and have a range of skills to meaningfully communicate with them.

Since the last inspection, progress has been made in the borough's response to children going missing and to exploitation. Social workers understand exploitation risks and are cognisant of the tools available to assess levels of risk, so that they understand children's needs well. Clear communication systems and well-informed practice positively reduce exploitation risks and missing incidents for most children. Leaders and partners are ambitious to further augment the response to exploitation, refining risk assessment tools through increased staffing, so that children receive effective help from an intensive multi-agency response.

Social workers undertake direct work that helps children to understand their vulnerabilities when they go missing, become involved with strangers online or are at risk of exploitation. The tenacity and sensitivity of social workers ensure that most children are engaged once when they return from being missing, and most children are also offered return home interviews. Social workers understand why children go missing, and through careful planning, children's missing incidents reduce.

Social workers are curious and are knowledgeable about the interventions necessary to reduce risk for children susceptible to exploitation. Staff convene well-attended strategy meetings, and emerging community safety concerns are monitored effectively at the multi-agency child exploitation panel. Social workers are responsive to children who are at risk of sexual exploitation and act swiftly to reduce risks, seeking legal interventions and bespoke medicals when necessary. Social workers use sensitive and thoughtful language in written records to take account of children's traumatic experiences.

Social workers carry out visits in line with standards set out in the local authority's practice guidance and when necessary, they visit more often, in line with children's assessed needs and vulnerabilities. Other intervention for families is mobilised quickly from the staying together service and families receive immediate, highly effective help when needs are identified. The excellent range of parenting guidance provided by skilful staying together workers prevents family breakdown or provides successful return of children home from care. Parents access a comprehensive group-work offer to strengthen parenting strategies, for example, specific support for fathers and strategies for conflict resolution.

Significant improvements made since the last inspection ensure that the experiences of children aged 16 and 17 years who present as homeless have improved. Workers' assessments of children's needs are holistic, recognising children's vulnerability. A comprehensive accommodation offer is available when this is necessary. However, written records do not always confirm children are properly informed about all their rights and entitlements.

Social work assessments and planning have the benefit of regular management oversight. Reflective practice discussions are embedded through a number of panel processes, providing further oversight of social work practice. Supervision is regular and provides direction to inform next steps for work with families. Regular group supervision helps social workers problem-solve and learn from each other.

Leaders have a mature, comprehensive and highly effective quality assurance framework. Effective consideration of performance management data allows senior leaders and managers to understand and respond to any gaps in performance in a timely manner. The audit practice tool, completed collaboratively with social workers, allows for reflection and seeks feedback from families. These activities provide assurance and insight into the impact of practice with children, helping leaders to continually innovate and refine service responses to families.

Feedback from families is actively sought and the family advocacy restorative engagement group (FLARE) assists in cultivating leaders' strategic responses that incorporate families' views. Leaders continue with their ambitions to listen to families, and strategic participation plans seek to further amplify children's voices.

Social work practice flourishes in Bexley, with manageable caseloads, an extensive training offer and career pathways that retain staff and promote staff excellence. Leaders have developed the workforce strategy, offering multiple pathways to enhance the employment offer to social workers, including recruiting and supporting international social work staff. The reliance on agency staff has reduced, allowing consistency and stability for children. The approach of leaders in children's social care has promoted a council-wide recruitment and retention philosophy, embedding the corporate response to children.

Social workers greatly value the supportive and safe environment in which they work and speak highly of their managers and colleagues. International social workers are supported with living in England and are provided with a thorough induction. This helps with managing the increasing complexity of the work and reflects the relational, engaging approach which is apparent in all areas of social work practice with families. Workers emphasise their appreciation of the excellent anti-racist approach that is core to staff recruitment, training and well-being. All social workers, permanent and agency staff, are proud of what they do and are exceptionally positive about working in Bexley.

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

Yours sincerely

Naintara Khosla
His Majesty's Inspector