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Dear Elaine

Focused visit to Barking and Dagenham children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Barking and Dagenham children's services on 26 to 27 March 2025. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Sophie Wales and Jenny-Ellen Scotland.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need or subject to a protection plan.

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

Headline findings

Since the last inspection in 2023, when the experiences and progress of children who need help and protection were judged to require improvement to be good, leaders have sustained and, in some areas, strengthened practice.

Threshold decisions for child in need and child protection are mostly well applied, with children receiving the right support at the right time and workers managing risk appropriately. Additional management capacity means that there is now more purposeful oversight of practice and stronger supervision for many staff, although this is not yet being consistently delivered across the service. Some children subject to the pre-proceedings stage of the public law outline still wait too long for decisive action to be taken for them.

Barking and Dagenham is an area with significant population growth and mobility, where demand for services is high. In this context, council leaders and local elected members have prioritised support for vulnerable children, enabling tangible progress in the local authority's improvement journey, although this remains finely balanced within the context of challenging partnership priorities and a complex safeguarding landscape.

Leaders have an accurate self-assessment and know the strengths and weaknesses of their services well. A strengthened focus on quality assurance and performance is providing leaders with an improving line of sight into practice, although there is more to do to learn from individual children and families' experiences.

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

- The timeliness of pre-proceedings pathways.
- The effectiveness of direct work and the more consistent use of tools to inform decision-making when children's circumstances change or when insufficient progress is being made.
- The focus on safety planning and contingency planning to inform timely and decisive action when risks for children are not reducing quickly enough.
- The effectiveness of supervision to inform and support decision-making for children.

Main findings

Social workers meet with children in need and those subject to child protection plans regularly and spend time getting to know them by seeing them on their own. Social workers know the children they work with. While records about children are descriptive and bring them to life, work to understand the impact of children's experiences is mostly conversational. Tools are not always used consistently to gather children's wishes and feelings and, importantly, to inform decision-making.

Statutory visits to children are timely, with careful consideration for how frequently children should be seen. Visits are mostly well recorded and detail what is working well. They provide a detailed description of the individual child and their achievements. These important records of children's lives are written with care and kindness.

Disabled children who are subject to a child protection plan are well supported. Skilled and sensitive workers know and understand children's lived experiences through a range of direct work and observation.

Increased frequency of supervision helps social workers to prioritise their daily tasks, and this is helpful to them. Supervision is not always reflective, however. This makes it harder for social workers to plan effectively for next steps when children's needs escalate or their circumstances change.

Practice is effective when children's cases step down from child protection plans to child in need plans. Social workers visit children more frequently when necessary,

and they understand risks well. Practice is proportionate, strengths based and relational.

There is more variability in the oversight and management of risk for children in need who have not been previously subject to a child protection plan. In some cases, this results in children remaining subject to statutory intervention for longer than necessary.

Social workers appropriately convene child protection strategy meetings when risk and harm escalate for children in statutory processes. Social workers consult conference chairs about the threshold for child protection, leading to more consistent practice. However, strategy meetings are too dependent on partner agency availability and delays mean that some children remain in situations of risk for longer than necessary.

Plans for children in need are iterative and clear to follow. Well-measured and timely tasks address what needs to happen and by when to reduce harm. While child protection plans set out risk and harm and most describe what needs to change, some are not clear and specific enough to help parents understand what they need to do to keep children safe.

Social workers do not routinely develop and share safety plans with families and professionals. This means that parents and families are not always clear on what protective action they should take to keep their children safe.

Contingency plans are under-developed. They are too generic and not always related to the individual child's circumstances and they do not provide enough purposeful detail for parents, carers and other professionals. The plans do not set out clearly enough the next steps to take should parents disengage, or risks increase. Contingency plans for children who are subject to child protection planning do not fully consider the consequences of what could happen if arrangements are not adhered to.

The quality of step-down planning for children who are exiting statutory services is undermined by social workers losing valuable time because they are having to negotiate partner agency lead professional roles. This is causing unnecessary delay for children.

Some children are left in worrying situations for too long before the pre-proceedings process is initiated. Some experience further delay once decisions are made to enter pre-proceedings, as there has been too much reliance on independent social worker assessments that are taking too long to be initiated. Leaders are aware and are developing an in-house expert court assessment team to improve timeliness.

Letters that explain to parents why the local authority has concerns are too generic and do not focus enough on the impact of parental behaviour on children, or the harmful situations that children are living in.

Purposeful work takes place with adolescents. Skilled and capable workers have the knowledge and skills needed in this complex and risky area of safeguarding. Stronger management oversight in this part of the service helps workers to focus effectively on issues of risk and harm. Social workers are finely balancing decisions for children, using a range of tools and practice to inform their decision-making.

Neglect is well understood by social workers, and work undertaken by the council with partner agencies has strengthened practice. Tools are used effectively with most families. However, for some children who experience serious neglect to the point that it is necessary to issue care proceedings, tools are used too late to effect meaningful change.

Social workers understand domestic abuse well and consider its cultural implications in terms of faith, social standing with communities, isolation and financial abuse. Child protection plans are generally clear about the risks to children, although some plans are too focused on parents and not enough on the impact for their children.

Barking and Dagenham children benefit from a well-regarded, permanent and stable leadership team that is knowledgeable and skilled and that does not stand still.

Strong corporate and elected member support has ensured investment to tackle the most challenging issues. An increase in management capacity has strengthened the retention of front-line staff. This is leading to more stable relationships for children with their social workers, and this is reflected in children's experiences. Workforce development as a key improvement strand is gaining traction. Staff are committed to the authority's improvement journey.

The approach to supervision has been strengthened, but this is not yet consistently delivered across all teams. Supervision for some workers is too task focused and insufficiently reflective.

Higher caseloads in some teams make it difficult for workers to undertake meaningful work with children at the intensity needed to reduce risk and harm in the timescales they need. In these circumstances, it has been difficult to ensure long-term change for some children. Leaders have taken action to create additional management capacity in recent months, however, and this means that workers are better supported to prioritise tasks that need to be completed.

Social workers benefit from a range of development and progression opportunities. Morale among workers is positive and they report a strong sense of worth and value. Workers spoken to said they feel well supported and liked working in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham.

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

Yours sincerely

Sophie Wales
His Majesty's Inspector