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Mr Chris Munday
Executive Director, Children's and Family Services
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Dear Chris

Focused visit to the London Borough of Barnet 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 Barnet local authority children's services on 23 and 24 June 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Tara Geere and Christine Kennet.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in care.

This visit was carried out 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. 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. This visit was carried out fully by remote means. Inspectors used telephone and video calls for discussions with local authority staff, managers, leaders and partner agencies, including the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) and the judiciary.

Headline findings

Despite the significant challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, the committed and stable senior leadership team has continued to improve services to children in care in Barnet. Leaders have an accurate understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of their services. They have identified areas for improvement and have appropriate plans in place to address these issues. Leaders recognise that some changes in response to the key areas highlighted at the last inspection in 2019 still require further strengthening. The vast majority of children in care benefit from living in placements that meet their individual needs and impact positively on their experiences and progress.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Case recording, including the recording of supervision, visits and direct work with children, and the rationale for decision-making on placements.
- The completion and quality of 'All about me' plans.

Main findings

Senior leaders and partner agencies in Barnet have worked together to deliver a well-coordinated and effective response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This has included surge testing and support to asylum-seekers placed without notice by the Home Office in dispersal centres within the borough. Despite the ongoing pressures, leaders have continued to prioritise children's services, underpinned by strong corporate and political support. At the beginning of the pandemic, all children's cases were risk assessed to establish visiting schedules to children in accordance with their vulnerability. Social workers have continued to keep these arrangements under regular review.

When children cannot live safely with their families, decisive action is taken so that children come into care in a timely manner to protect and safeguard their welfare. Practice leaders have built strong relationships with Cafcass and the Family Court.

The vast majority of children in care benefit from living in placement arrangements which meet their individual needs. Children told inspectors that they valued their carers and felt well supported. The rationale for placement matching and for decisions to move older children into unregulated provision is understood by staff. However, managers' decisions are not consistently recorded on case files.

A small number of children have had to move home too many times. As a result, placement stability is being closely monitored by senior leaders. Any concerns identified are responded to with a range of additional support, including increased frequency of visits by workers, strengthened management oversight and placement stability meetings, so that children remain in their homes if appropriate.

The director of children's services is leading the Barnet placement transformation programme to develop more local placements for children and young people. He is also leading pan-London work on placement sufficiency. Throughout the pandemic, managers have continued to recruit new foster carers and hosts for supported living arrangements.

Leaders have strengthened the systems and processes to monitor placements and to track arrangements to secure permanence for children and young people. An increasing number of children are benefiting from being placed in matched long-term arrangements, although these are not consistently celebrated formally. Life-story work is not routinely evidenced on files for children in long-term foster care,

although consultation on how to undertake this specialist work is available from the special guardianship team.

Out-of-borough placements are not routinely informed by consultations with host authorities. This means that children may not receive services promptly to meet their needs, such as education. Notification letters do not provide sufficient information about how the proposed arrangements are expected to meet the child's needs.

Disabled children in care benefit from the work of the staff in the 0-25 team. Workers know their children and families well and demonstrate a strong awareness of their complex needs and increased risks due to additional vulnerabilities.

Barnet has seen a significant rise in the number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children within the borough. These children benefit from effective, timely work to ensure that their needs are assessed and responded to. Their educational, emotional and physical health needs are well considered, and translators are used to support children's engagement if necessary.

Since the last inspection, senior leaders have focused on improvements to planning for children in care. However, completion of the 'All about me' plan is not consistent, especially when children's cases are in the court arena. Stronger examples of these plans demonstrate clear co-production with children, although the language used in plans is not always child friendly.

Case recording does not always do justice to the child-centred and creative work that is being undertaken by social workers, particularly in relation to the recording of visits and the direct work undertaken with children.

Senior leaders, managers and social workers demonstrate a clear focus on hearing the voices of children and young people to develop and further improve services. The Barnet children in care council, 'Barnet on Point' (BOP), has continued to support children and young people in having their views heard throughout the pandemic. Children have been engaged through a range of activities, including virtual cook-alongs, consultations, celebration events and the recently commissioned Bright Spots survey.

The corporate parenting panel has continued to provide scrutiny to the service throughout the pandemic, obtaining children's feedback to focus improvements for children and young people in Barnet.

When children in care go missing, they receive a timely offer of a return home interview, although not all children take up the offer. This limits the understanding of the push and pull factors for children. To mitigate this, social workers undertake a robust analysis of risk using a child exploitation and missing (CEAM) tool. This is assisting in ensuring that missing children are routinely discussed at CEAM strategy meetings, to inform analysis and to develop plans to reduce risks.

Throughout the pandemic, there has been close collaboration with the looked after children's health service to help to improve the health outcomes of children in care. Despite the challenges that the pandemic has caused for health services, health assessments of children in care have continued to be prioritised and, before dental surgeries reopened, emergency dental treatment was available if required. Children benefit from the integrated clinical service that is fully embedded into family services.

The virtual school acted swiftly at the start of the first national lockdown to work with school leaders to identify and support vulnerable pupils. School attendance for children in care has been closely monitored and has significantly improved over the lockdown periods. Social workers have maintained close liaison with carers and the virtual school to ensure planned returns to school for pupils following lockdowns. Children's educational experiences have been further supported through the use of additional tuition, distribution of laptops and development of online learning resources to support foster carers. COVID-19-specific personal education plans (PEPs) have been developed to focus on supporting children during this period.

Since the last inspection, leaders have strengthened the offer of independent visitors and of advocacy. Advocacy is offered as routine. Children benefit from this support to help them to share their views and opinions in a range of meetings.

Independent reviewing officers (IROs) provide effective oversight of children's planning at timely reviews. Minutes from reviews have been significantly improved by writing them to the children. However, leaders are aware that these could be further strengthened by ensuring that actions are focused on children's lived experiences.

Social workers are supported by a well-established learning and development programme that has continued with online training. The proportion of permanent social workers has increased in the last year. Staff talk positively about their manageable caseloads. They report feeling supported by visible and approachable managers and senior leaders through the challenges of the pandemic and the home-working arrangements. Staff have had regular team meetings and good access to IT equipment, while also having access to office bases if necessary. Staff value regular supervision, however, recording does not always do justice to the quality of the reflection reported by social workers.

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

Yours sincerely

Tara Geere
Her Majesty's Inspector