

19 October 2021

Janet Bailey
Director of Children, Education and Families
Bromley Civic Centre
Stockwell Close
Bromley
BR1 3UH

Dear Janet

Focused visit to London Borough of Bromley children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to London Borough of Bromley children's services on 14 and 15 September 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Louise Hocking and Anna Gravelle.

Inspectors considered the local authority's arrangements for children in care, including disabled children in care.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. This visit was carried out fully by remote means. Both inspectors used video calls for discussions with local authority staff, managers and leaders.

Headline findings

Children in Bromley are recognised as a high priority and the lead member and the chief executive ensure that a consideration of their needs is championed and embedded in the wider council. Children in care in Bromley continue to make good progress, supported by a stable and skilled workforce. Ambitious and determined leadership ensures that services continue to strengthen so there is a positive experience for children in care. The local authority continues on a positive trajectory of improvement supported by additional investment and resourcing. A new head of service for children in care provides strong and clear leadership.

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

- That data and intelligence for return home interviews accurately reflects the work undertaken with children to reflect their experiences.

Main findings

There has been a relatively high rate of COVID-19 (coronavirus) infection in Bromley, that has had a significant impact on families and staff. Senior leaders and partners

have managed the impact of this well and staff have demonstrated resilience and resourcefulness. Feedback was sought through a staff survey to understand what was most helpful to staff to support them in their work. The local partnership has provided a coordinated and well-resourced response for children and a wide range of support services to ensure the continued well-being of children and staff.

Social work practice continues to strengthen in Bromley. All children in care, including disabled children and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, receive a sensitive and committed social work service. Thresholds are well understood and applied appropriately. Children only come into care if this is the most appropriate plan for them. Successful preventative services, such as the Staying Together service, mean that many children on the edge of care have been able to be supported at home. Decisions to come into care, or return home, are made thoughtfully and in the best interests of children. Senior managers oversee these decisions effectively.

Practitioners know their children very well and provide enduring and committed relationships with children. For many children, such relationships have been over several years. Inspectors found that the Bromley relationship model underpins thoughtful and highly individualised practice. The quality of the relationships that social workers establish and maintain with children is the cornerstone of practice. This shone through in practice that was characterised by persistence and a clear and insightful understanding of children's needs.

Direct work is consistently of a high quality and is undertaken alongside children to help them understand their plans and histories. Creative and imaginative life-story work is undertaken for all children in care. Manageable caseloads allow social workers to offer regular dedicated time to spend with children and visits are frequently more regular than set requirements. Social workers and carers support children to enjoy a wide range of hobbies and leisure interests.

Practitioners understand why they are involved in children's lives and all work is underpinned by clear care planning. Children have up-to-date care plans that are reviewed regularly, with 95% of reviews being held on time. Notes are written sensitively and directly to each child.

The impact of the pandemic on children with disabilities has meant that more children have come into care in Bromley. These decisions are appropriate and are characterised by close partnership working with parents and other partners to ensure the best for each child. Comprehensive multi-agency packages of support are offered and are highly effective in meeting children's needs.

Children benefit from good placement stability and are settled and doing well where they live, in appropriately matched and caring homes. Children placed at a distance receive a similarly high degree of support and services are promptly provided for them. A proactive virtual school advocates strongly for appropriate educational provision. Personal education plans are up to date and 95% of children in care have

had an up-to-date medical. This figure rises to 100% for children under five years. Family time is thoughtfully planned and creatively supported.

A comprehensive and current sufficiency strategy is well informed and suitably analysed. This leads to a detailed understanding of placement need and resulting actions required. Recent initiatives such as the emergency foster placement scheme for out-of-hours placements successfully support children to be placed locally. Although placement sufficiency presents some challenges, the local authority continues to adapt well and plan appropriately.

No children are placed in unregistered provision and no children under the age of 16 are placed in semi-independent accommodation. A useful range of additional scrutiny measures mean that the small numbers of young people in such accommodation are kept safe and careful consideration is regularly given to the suitability of this provision as the best option for each young person. The recent initiative of 'young inspectors' has a focus on semi-independent accommodation leading to a child-centred understanding of how practice can be further improved.

There is a strong range of resources to support children with their emotional well-being and mental health. This includes two in-house CAMHS workers and the THRIVE therapeutic service. Additionally, Bromley Y offers a comprehensive and effective range of mental health and emotional well-being services for children and their families and incorporates a dedicated focus on children in care, including those who live out of the area.

Risks to children looked after are clearly understood and responded to well. Strategy meetings are held as required. Children who go missing receive a bespoke response according to their need. This might be through a discussion with their social worker or through a return home interview offered by the independent Atlas team, or both. The work undertaken in this area is stronger than is indicated by the data. The director of children's social care scrutinises a daily list of children who are missing, to ensure an immediate senior and operational response. However, while it is known when a child in care is missing and there is a proportionate response to individual risk, this information is not fully collated to inform strategic planning.

A wide range of supportive and empowering activities are run through the Active Involvement team in conjunction with the living in care council (LinCC). LinCC members actively reach out to other children in care. Celebration of achievements events continued during the pandemic and the LinCC chair received a mayoral award and is a national ambassador.

Bromley is staffed by a high percentage of permanent staff, with 84% overall and 100% in the children looked after service. This helps to ensure that children have consistent social work relationships. Supervision takes place regularly and drives plans for children through a clear and agreed set of actions. Supervision records are current and comprehensive but not consistently reflective. Reflective discussion is

undertaken through useful mapping exercises within individual teams to help problem-solve issues.

Performance information is used effectively by managers to understand what is happening for children and to plan. The monthly performance digest provides comprehensive data and a constant narrative on what is happening for children. 'Data Mondays' ensure that all managers have up-to-date information to inform their work. The council has recently invested in a new case recording system to support workers and managers in their use of data and case records for children. This is in the process of being embedded.

Senior leaders and managers offer scrutiny to ensure that children are safe. Management oversight at all levels is evident in considering risks and making plans for children. Operational managers maintain appropriate direct involvement in children's lives, including undertaking visits, meeting with parents and doing direct work when this is the best course of action for the child. Case records are comprehensive and up to date. Some key management decisions could be more explicit in a minority of case records.

The open learning culture in Bromley is supported by regular external scrutiny, including through an independently chaired practice improvement board. There is a healthy culture of challenge. A recurring and helpful programme of thematic and randomly selected practice reviews ensures that senior leaders regularly assess the experience offered to children. Further refinements are being made to the practice review process to enhance understanding and increase impact.

Children and young people are active members of a dynamic corporate parenting board and the voice of children, individually and collectively, is integrated into the council planning. The work of the board is underpinned by a refreshed corporate parenting strategy in 2021 and supported by four additional sub-groups.

Staff are happy working for Bromley. They enjoy their work and feel well supported. A comprehensive learning and development offer is available, as is the opportunity for career progression. Managers, including senior managers, respond quickly to support staff and help in decision-making. Leaders are described as completely supportive, accessible and available to staff.

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

Yours sincerely

Louise Hocking
Her Majesty's Inspector