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Elaine Allegretti
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The London Borough of Barking and Dagenham
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Dear Ms Allegretti

Focused visit to the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Barking and Dagenham children's services on 4 and 5 May 2022. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Brenda McLaughlin, lead inspector, Tracey Ledder, team inspector and Nhlanganiso Nyathi, who observed the visit.

Inspectors considered the local authority's arrangements for planning and achieving permanence, with a particular focus on early permanence across all age groups and services.

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

Headline findings

Permanence planning and stability for children are starting to improve but practice remains too variable. Parallel planning for those children unable to live safely with their parents, including options to live with family members, is being considered earlier for more children. Increased levels of demand in an already very challenging local environment have affected the quality of services for some vulnerable children. Leaders accept that despite their commitment to improvement, and high aspirations, the pace of change needs to accelerate.

Some young children live in residential children's homes for long periods of time. Permanence planning and practice for these children are weak and management oversight and independent reviewing officer (IRO) involvement is ineffective. A small number of children, some as young as eight years old, have drifted for several years without the requisite contingency planning or actions to find suitable long-term foster families. While this practice is not systemic across all teams, senior leaders agree with the findings of inspectors that urgent action is required to progress permanence plans more quickly.

Leaders are aware that additional recruitment and retention of skilled foster carers to meet the needs of children who have experienced significant trauma is critical to their successful improvement of services. In addition, there is a need for sufficient senior leadership capacity to drive the required changes. A revised and appropriately ambitious targeted permanence plan is underpinned by the philosophy that every child has the right to a permanent and stable home. This whole-system approach is beginning to make a difference but needs to be further embedded in practice. Leaders are taking action to strengthen and align a plethora of panels to ensure that permanence decisions are made in the best interests for all children and care leavers. Most social workers know the children with whom they work well and they speak affectionately and with great pride about their children's progress. Morale within the workforce is good and all staff and managers spoke very positively about working in Barking and Dagenham.

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

- Planning for children to ensure that permanence is achieved for all children and care leavers without delay.
- Timely and effective parallel and contingency planning for children living in children's homes.
- The quality of staff supervision to ensure that timely management decisions are made and recorded at all levels to prevent children's plans drifting.
- An increased sufficiency of suitable foster care homes for children with complex needs across all age groups.
- The quality and availability of life-story work for all children.
- Additional management capacity at a senior operational level.

Main findings

Children's social care in Barking and Dagenham is under significant pressure due to the levels of poverty and related deprivation experienced by many of its residents. The level of unemployment is the highest in the country. These issues have been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders advised that they are still learning from and experiencing the impact of this. The child population is also growing rapidly. There is unprecedented service demand, with an increase in 2,000 more referrals to social care than this time last year. There are 420 children on child protection plans, the highest ever number in the borough. Permanence planning is a priority and is starting to improve across teams and services, but despite strenuous efforts by leaders and all staff, the quality of practice for children and care leavers is variable. Lack of leadership capacity affects the timeliness and scale of improvement.

Delays in simultaneous parallel family finding are building significant delay for some children. Too many very young children live in children's homes that do not meet their long-term needs for stability. These children are drifting in care. Leaders are now acting to address these concerns following inspectors' findings on this visit. Most

social workers receive regular supervision and report excellent relationships with their supportive managers but managers at all levels do not consistently identify or challenge drift and delay in some teams.

Contingency planning and thinking are not yet consistently part of the culture across teams and services. The revised and ambitious permanence strategy is intended to support a whole-system approach for all children, including those in need and those subject to child protection plans. This is a positive development but there is still some confusion about what permanence means. For example, permanence planning meetings when children come into care are infrequent or are delayed. This delay is insufficiently escalated by IROs or by operational managers. Leaders are taking action to rationalise the numerous 'panels' tasked with making decisions about children in care and care leavers, as some lack clarity, direction and purpose

Conversely, work since the previous inspection has significantly improved the quality and timeliness of work with children in pre-proceedings. Detailed monthly and quarterly reports provide effective oversight, analysis and challenge. This is helping to prevent drift. Assiduous management grip ensures that plans for permanence are starting to be considered earlier for these children. Effective work to 'frontload' assessments and support families is appropriately diverting children from the courts. COVID-19 has had an impact on court time availability, resulting in significant delays for some children. Information about the impact on individual children is scrutinised by senior managers and the senior IRO weekly. There is regular communication with the family judge and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass). If concerns escalate, the local authority will apply to the court to expedite hearings for children. Increased support and visits by the specialist team provide additional safeguards.

Strong work led by skilled, committed managers in the family support and safeguarding service and the multidisciplinary pre-birth teams is making a difference to helping and protecting children. Staff in these teams work hard to understand parental and family histories and cultures, as well as the impact on parents of mental illness, domestic abuse, substance addiction and insecure housing. Commendable examples were seen of social workers sensitively working together with the 'Pause' team supporting vulnerable women who have had several of their children removed from their care while keeping a clear focus on children's needs for permanence planning. Recent developments focusing on children in need who have been known to services for over nine months or who have previously been in care is helping to measure whether change for children is being sustained within their time frame. This work is intended to reduce delays for children and enable them to live safely within their own family.

Most social workers know children well. They spoke affectionately and with great pride about their children's progress. Staff's enthusiasm and determination to do the right thing are palpable and consequently many children are making progress in care supported by highly committed professionals and foster carers. Despite substantial challenges, diligent work by these staff to build trusting relationships is helping more children feel safer, with examples of effective, culturally sensitive and skilled direct

work helping children to understand their experiences. Significant effort is made to engage with children, including those with additional needs. Children are supported and encouraged to see family members if it is safe to do so. Bespoke in-house therapists are increasing staff's, foster carers' and children's emotional resilience, and this is improving placement stability. Leaders are aware that more work is needed to ensure that all children can complete life-story work, including those living with special guardians and connected carers.

Good use is made of family group conferences and special guardians, enabling children to live with family members where it is assessed as suitable. Timely 'together and apart assessments' support children to live with their brothers and sisters, or with extended family when it is appropriate and safe. Children live with carers who reflect their diverse cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds. Collaborative work with the regional adoption agency targets effectively the recruitment of prospective adopters, who reflect the diverse local community. The virtual school provides effective good-quality support to help learners in care across all key stages, although this is not consistent enough for children who live out of borough.

Permanence planning to support care experienced young people is underpinned by an enhanced co-produced local offer endorsed by political leaders. An improved housing offer and dedicated staff to support young people pay their rent and prevent evictions are leading to more stability. Multi-agency transition care planning meetings for young people aged 17-plus, in addition to their pathway planning and child in care reviews, ensure that support is available to all young people, including those in custody. However, for several young people with complex emotional difficulties risk remains high and the quality of practice is not as effective. The number of care leavers in 'staying put' arrangements is growing and the numbers in education and employment are rising. Positive tenacious work is helping support young people succeed in their careers and at university.

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

Yours sincerely

Brenda McLaughlin
Her Majesty's Inspector