

23 August 2018

Chris Munday
London borough of Barnet
North London Business Park
Oakleigh Road South
New Southgate
N11 1NP

Dear Mr Munday,

Monitoring visit of Barnet local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Barnet local authority children's services on 31 July and 1 August 2018. The visit was the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in July 2017. The inspectors were Louise Warren, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Rachel Griffiths, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Areas covered by the visit

During this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made for children looked after across a range of teams, including the children in care teams and the intervention and planning teams.

Inspectors focused on:

- the quality of assessment and care planning for children looked after
- the quality of case recording, management oversight and supervision, including the oversight of independent reviewing officers
- the use and effectiveness of performance management and quality assurance information
- placement sufficiency and stability, and the quality and timeliness of assessments for connected carers
- the timeliness and effectiveness of plans for permanence.

A range of evidence was considered during the visit, including electronic case records, supervision notes, case management records, performance data, audits and progress reports. In addition, inspectors spoke to a range of staff, including managers and social workers.

Overview

In the areas of practice considered during this visit, senior leaders, managers and the local authority improvement partner have maintained a consistent and strong focus on improving services and the quality of social work practice. The scope and pace of this work in the last year has been appropriately considered and has been steady. Some changes and improvements are now well established, such as the quality assurance processes and foster carer recruitment. Other changes are more recent or new, such as arrangements for connected carers, and require further consolidation. The workforce is now more stable and caseloads are manageable. This is enabling social workers to build better relationships with children and to get to know them better. Staff morale is good, with new social workers joining Barnet as a positive choice, and existing social workers who met inspectors also welcoming the improvements being made.

Managers have made considerable progress in widely embedding the quality assurance framework and particularly the use of audits for children looked after. This is making a difference and strengthening practice. Changes have been made to improve processes and practice. These changes have tightened management oversight and decision-making for children who need permanence, including the assessment and support for connected carers. Placement choice for children is improving with the positive recruitment of more foster carers. Further plans are in place to review placement provision to ensure that it reflects the needs of the children in Barnet.

Inspectors found a stronger core of improved practice, with children seen to be appropriately looked after, and their needs for permanence and stability being mostly met. Inspectors found that, proportionately, there is much less case work of an inadequate standard. This finding concurs with the local authority's realistic assessment of their own performance. However, there is more work to be done to improve practice to reach a good standard overall. Practice is still too variable, particularly around the quality of children's assessments and plans.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Recent practice for children looked after is improving. Social workers have manageable caseloads, which means that they have time to engage in direct work with children. Those spoken to by inspectors reported that they liked working in Barnet and welcomed the positive shift in culture towards more child-centred practice and relationship working with children and families. More permanent team managers are now in place, and this is providing greater stability for social workers. Inspectors found that supervision and management oversight is evident on case files, but this is not always regular, and, in some cases, lacked reflection and challenge. Social workers reported to inspectors that they valued informal supervision and management direction. However, this was not often recorded on case files in order to inform a full understanding of children's progress or plans.

Quality assurance processes are a strength. The use of auditing is well established, with more than a third of all children in care cases having been subject to a detailed audit since January 2018. Audits accurately identify practice improvements and determine appropriate actions for staff, who are open to learning to improve their practice. Performance management information is reliable and is effectively utilised by senior leaders and managers to analyse performance, to inform developments and to identify areas for improvement.

Child-centred practice is beginning to embed, and this is making a positive difference to the quality of social work practice and the understanding of children's lived experiences, informed by their views. Social workers are generally visiting children regularly and know them well. Direct work with children is improving and becoming more purposeful, although it is not yet consistently occurring for all children. The use of the practice development workers to support social workers to improve their practice and facilitate direct work is effective and is leading to more recent stronger practice. However, the variability of practice means that while some children are assisted well to communicate their wishes and feelings, and these inform their plans, plans for other children are made without their full involvement.

Life-story work for some children is in place, but this practice is not embedded for all children. Managers are aware of this shortfall and have appropriate plans in place to address this in the future.

The quality of social work practice with children's families and connected carers remains inconsistent. Recent changes to improve the quality of practice for children to live with connected carers, including staff training and more robust systems to provide management oversight and scrutiny, are beginning to ensure that children are safely placed for permanence. Managers are aware that, for some children, not all family members are identified as early as possible or that there is drift in the early stages of assessments, and this can lead to delay in being able to plan and approve permanent moves for children into the care of family members or connected carers.

Case notes and case summaries considered during this visit are mostly comprehensive and up to date. Inspectors found some gaps in recording of informal management oversight, and some documents are not accurately recorded, with out-of-date actions, or errors due to records not being updated properly.

Assessments for children in care are variable in quality. Most assessments are limited to updating a template for children's statutory reviews. This does not always provide the detail or an appropriate analysis to cover all areas of a child's needs, particularly for issues of diversity and for those with complex family histories. Care plans considered by inspectors were not of a consistent quality. Not all care plans are thorough, regularly updated or record specific actions. There is less sense of the child in the poorer plans seen, and they do not cover all aspects of the child's life or demonstrate how they will improve children's outcomes.

Children have regular and timely reviews. The independent reviewing officers are engaging with children midway between reviews, and there is evidence of their involvement seen in children's case files. However, their challenge to care plans is still inconsistent and is not always effective in achieving improved practice or the timelier progression of children's plans.

To ensure that children can be placed within their permanent homes at the earliest opportunity, managers have embedded the permanency planning panel and have more recently established a permanence tracker meeting. This is beginning to consolidate better practice. While these processes enable managers to have tighter oversight and grip on children's plans for permanence and ensure that decision-making is timely and effective, this is not yet systematically embedded and for some children permanence planning is still too reactive. However, inspectors found that, for most children, permanence plans are in place, including for those children who are long-term fostered, placed with parents and living with connected carers.

Placement stability and choices of placements for children are improving. There are significantly more approved 'in-house' carers, and some foster carers who have transferred from independent fostering agencies to benefit from the support packages on offer in Barnet. Senior managers are currently reviewing the sufficiency strategy and other placement options. This includes increasing local residential provision and reviewing semi-independent provision for adolescents in order to ensure that this accurately reflects the needs of children in care in Barnet.

In summary, this monitoring visit has found that an appropriately considered and steady pace of change in the last year has begun to establish improved social work practice for children looked after. Senior leaders are aware that improvements are still inconsistent and require further consolidation and focus across all teams before practice is of a good standard.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely,

Louise Warren
Her Majesty's Inspector