

24 December 2021

Chris Munday  
Executive Director, Children's and Family Services  
London Borough of Barnet  
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Dear Chris

### **Social care annual engagement meeting on 18 November 2021 via Teams**

#### **Attendees**

Chris Munday, Executive Director, Children's and Family Services, Barnet  
Tina McElligott, Director of Children's Social Care (Early help and children's social care)  
Brigitte Jordaan, Director of Children's Social Care (Children in care, placements and disabilities)  
Grace Walker, Inspection and Improvement Lead  
Carolyn Adcock, Senior HMI, Ofsted

#### **Apologies**

Andy Whippey, HMI, Ofsted

Thank you for sharing your self-evaluation and performance data with us, and for the informative discussion about current performance and the actions that you are taking to develop the service further.

#### **The self-evaluation**

The self-evaluation is clearly presented. It's helpful to see the itemised progress against the actions noted last year, plus the focus for the year ahead. You said that you are still dealing with the pandemic and its longer-term consequences e.g. regarding education and mental ill-health. The local authority has put in much support across the board. You have opened a new children's home, and yesterday members agreed funding for 30 new flats for care leavers. The Home Office-commissioned hotels in the borough continue to create additional demands on resources. Contextual safeguarding is still an area of concern, with a greater proportion of online activity.

Tina said that demand for some services reduced during the pandemic but it's now almost back to 2019 levels. Early help continued to function, with a very large increase in delivery. The demand is beginning to come down, but she noted that early help services have been a real strength, and there is much more cross-cutting work happening now. Your work with the voluntary sector, which you value, is enabling you to have greater reach. On the downside, you have seen an increase in domestic abuse and mental health presentations. Two additional welfare advisers have been employed to support with advice on benefits, and mental health services are growing in the council. There are 70 staff in the mental health team, delivering support in a variety of ways. This has also enabled you to engage with children and parents in different ways.

There have been opportunities for innovation. For example you have launched the parenting hub which aligns to the early help model. It serves the whole borough, delivering intensive mentalisation work with an attachment focus for under-fives, but also for families on the edge of care. This is all local authority funded, with evaluation of impact at some point in the future.

You have completed a multi-agency audit on thresholds - you think that you lowered thresholds in the early stages of the pandemic. You also carried out a multi-agency audit on the impact of COVID-19, which showed that social care and education were working well together, but some agencies e.g. regarding domestic abuse and drug and alcohol services were less engaged in face-to-face delivery. Domestic abuse commissioning has now moved to family services. Tina has taken on operational delivery for domestic abuse services and violence against women and girls. This is enabling a wider reach. You said that you are trying to get Saracens and other public facing organisations to support this year's White Ribbon event.

Brigitte noted that it has been a very challenging time for families of disabled children, and you have had to adjust the provision available. The voluntary sector is beginning to recover, but it is not back to where it was. Seven hundred families were asking for short breaks and personal budgets. You are currently looking at the short break offer, and you are working creatively with the voluntary sector. You have continued with the early help project regarding resources for autism, which has a preventative focus. You are planning a multi-agency respite and autism centre and you have got input from health and education. You are hoping that this will help to coordinate care and support more effectively. You have also been working on transition planning regarding supported living, delivering a new commissioning framework with adults. You are about to agree a bespoke contract with five young people aged 18 to 35. Providers are keen on helping with a flexible approach.

You expanded your Open Spaces project and carried out a number of short surveys, that showed that services were valued by families, e.g. the children centre and swimming pools.

The new children's home has opened, with four young people placed so far and more expected in the New Year. You have onsite clinicians and part of the home is the interventions centre, which is being used regularly.

You have two semi-independent provisions which are helpful for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, but the majority of children in care are adolescents. You have places for them from the age of 16 so that you prepare them for independence. You have involved care leavers and young people in planning. You have refreshed the corporate parenting strategy and included young people in that. You have a working group looking at the independent training offer which includes young people. You have set up Onwards and Upwards for care experienced young people, to take the lead on feedback for young people. You're creating a space for them to do independence training such as cooking and DIY, as they are saying that they need skills to learn to live on their own.

You are developing a focus on care leavers who are parents. You want to build an earlier intervention programme to help personal advisers think about care leavers who are parenting, and attachment issues.

You noted that placement stability for children in care is satisfactory, although you have seen a number of placement changes since September, and you are looking at these in more detail. You have some very resilient foster carers, but some placements have become more fragile. You are providing early stabilisation meetings to try to avoid placement disruption. You have also had a number of final hearings and some of these have resulted in moves for children. There are challenges in placement sufficiency, especially regarding children with complex needs and where needs have escalated. You are not planning to open any further children's homes of your own, and you want to keep the recruitment of foster carers central to the system. You are hoping to have 15 new foster carers by the end of March. Recruitment is slowly picking up. You now have 12 supported lodgings for 16-year-olds and are looking to increase this. Brigitte said that you also have seven foster carers who are only registered for respite, so you are looking at how you can use them in an emergency. You never use bed and breakfast accommodation.

I asked for your views about the proportion of assessments that you have judged as requiring improvement (37%), and whether there were any common themes. Tina said that things were slowing down at the front door and there was some turnover of agency staff, so this can be quickly remedied. Also, about 78% of section 47s did not result in initial child protection conferences. These cases were mostly to do with

physical chastisement with an implement. You are content that decision-making is appropriate and have tested it.

**Any broader issues that affect the delivery of children's social care services, for example, schools and early years provision**

You noted that overall attendance at schools is good and better than national averages. You are investigating some lower attendance levels for special schools, and especially in pupil referral units. Some students are unable to do the lateral flow test so have to self-isolate for 10 days. You have seen a huge increase in demand for home-to-school transport and also for therapeutic services. You have a new therapy provider. The NHS did close services down and has not fully opened up again in relation to face to face work, so you have dealt with a lot of gaps.

You have had two learning reviews published (in July and October) following cases regarding elective home education and you have consolidated the action plans. Some of the learning is about professional curiosity, and agencies not recognising the indicators of concern. Sometimes GPs may be the only external contact with a family. Also school transitions between boroughs meant that information was not passed on. You have been working with the DfE on elective home education and you are also working with a smaller group of local authorities who have completed local safeguarding practice reviews on this issue.

The safeguarding partnership held a series of webinars on the learning and there was reasonable attendance. You said that there is now a new website for elective home education funded by the DfE, and you have an increased resource for EHE. Tina said that a lot of children who are being electively home educated have additional needs, but there has been no surge in safeguarding concerns. On 7 October you knew of 423 children being electively home educated in Barnet.

**Unregulated/unregistered services and sufficiency of placements**

Brigitte said that there is one young person currently in an unregistered service who is moving on Monday to a registered home. The previous home had given 72 hours' notice and the young person has been in unregistered accommodation for a week. You have no young people placed on Deprivation of Liberty orders, and you have made sure that everyone who makes decisions regarding placements has the guidance on unregistered services.

You said that there is a shortfall of 225 places across London as a whole, plus some vacancies. London predominantly has small providers rather than larger chain providers, and you believe that smaller providers may be more risk averse. You have

developed a good understanding of the market and have invested heavily in placements e.g. the new children's home and the accommodation for care leavers.

### **Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children**

The Home Office continues to commission four hotels in Barnet. Over 900 people are placed in the hotels, and you have received over 50 referrals from them. You said that you accommodate more unaccompanied asylum-seeking children than the 0.07% threshold. About 25% of children in care are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (72 children), and 33% of care leavers. You have providers who assist with carrying out age assessments – most assessments confirm that the person is under 18. You said that you have provided resources to schools near the hotels, and you have appointed a psychologist specifically to provide support to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. For the unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, you have received extra resource from the government, but you note that it is not sufficient.

### **Barnet's current financial and political context**

You noted the London local elections that take place in May next year. You have had a consistent lead member who is committed and knowledgeable.

The budget has been agreed - it is challenging but sufficient. You will have some spending limits in 2022/23, as is the case this year, but that is only for one year. You have more money for placements and transport in the coming year

### **Safeguarding partnership arrangements**

You said that Red Quadrant assessed the arrangements last year and were satisfied with what they found. They are coming back next week and will speak to practitioners and senior leaders. The commissioning of the annual visit was mentioned in the recent Wood Review, and you said that you have made progress on implementing the recommendations from the last annual review. On Monday you are launching the draft child participation strategy for public consultation. You noted that there is a sound action plan regarding the learning from practice reviews.

You said that it is still not an equal partnership regarding resource. The police will only fund £5000 per year, while the local authority puts in over £100k.

Tina said that partnership and chairing relationships are working well but it can be hard to understand how effective the partnership is. The audit process works well but getting localised data, e.g. from the police or probation, can be a challenge and may be more of an issue with health as services transform.

## **Updates on any serious case reviews that are in progress or any learning reviews**

You said that you have one local child safeguarding practice review in progress regarding a 3-year-old whose parents had been in care. You are not undertaking any others at the moment.

## **Regional adoption agency arrangements**

The regional adoption agency has recently presented its annual report, which generated robust discussion. You are concerned that the number of Barnet children placed for adoption, and adopter recruitment, has decreased and you are meeting with the lead authority (Islington) to discuss this. You knew that there would be some disruption in 2019, but you now want to know how they are going to step up. You are also planning to discuss adoption support, as you have high numbers of adopter families in the borough. Brigitte has already raised some queries with Islington and is seeking a bespoke report for Barnet. There is an RAA board meeting next week.

## **Discussion around future visits by Ofsted**

I said that, as a result of the pandemic, Ofsted is at least a year behind in its inspection programme, although you will be scheduled for an inspection at some point. Should we carry out a focused visit in the meantime, you said that you would like inspectors to look at the care leaving service, although you would expect an inspection rather than a focused visit. You disagreed with the suggestion of a possible second focused visit to a good authority and said that you would raise this with leaders in Ofsted, should it happen.

## **The approximate timing of the next social care annual engagement meeting, and education-focused meeting**

You said that the current timings work well for you.

Thank you for a very constructive meeting.

Yours sincerely

**Carolyn Adcock**  
**Senior HMI**

Please note: This letter is not published by Ofsted and the comments made have not been evaluated as part of an inspection.