

London Borough of Barking and Dagenham

Children's Care and Support Self-Evaluation: Full Version

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1. Introduction and background	
- Introduction	Page 2
- About the borough	Page 2
- Our child population	Page 2
2. Summary: key messages	Page 4
3. Leadership and management: now and the future	Page 7
4. Early Help	Page 12
5. MASH (Front Door), Assessment and Intervention	Page 14
6. Children in Need or subject to a Child Protection Plan	Page 17
7. Vulnerable Adolescents	Page 22
8. Children in Care and Permanence	Page 26
9. Care Leavers	Page 32
10. Voices and Lived Experience	Page 36
11. How do we know it? Quality Assurance and Performance Management Summary	Page 39

1. Introduction and Background

Introduction

This document is the latest full version of Barking and Dagenham's Children's Care and Support self-evaluation. The self-evaluation provides an assessment of our continued improvement journey, setting out areas of progress and positive impact since our last annual engagement meeting in February 2020, and areas for continued improvement. Our plans to maintain and improve social work practice in the next 12 months are also set out.

Since the last self-assessment was produced we have experienced one of the most turbulent periods for public services – and people services in particular – with the global pandemic. Given the context of the borough and high levels of deprivation, COVID-19 has posed significant challenges for our whole community and has been - and remains – one of the greatest challenges many of us have faced.

Despite the enormous impact of the pandemic, and the significant challenge of maintaining business as usual throughout, we have continued our improvement journey and implementation of our Children's Care and Support Transformation Programme. We have remained relentless in our ambitions to improve the quality of social work practice; the lived experiences of - and outcomes for - children, young people, and their families, with much success. This is testament to the robust and effective leadership of the DCS, our Lead Member, and the collective senior leadership team. We recognise, as ever, that we have a way to go, but we are clear on the areas for improvement and our ambition to deliver good social work practice and service delivery remains undimmed.

This document provides an analysis of current strengths and progress made drawing upon existing documentation, audit findings, activity data and performance for 2019/20 compared with national, London and similar areas. Where available, it also considers local data and performance up to the end of November of 2020/21. It begins by setting out the demographic context of the borough. Key messages are then outlined, followed by an assessment of the

quality and impact of social work and our plans for improvement in the next 12 months.

About the borough

Barking and Dagenham has become one of the fastest-changing communities in Britain. The population was estimated to be 212,906 in 2019: an increase of 28% over the last 15 years and 9% over the last five years. National statistics project the population to increase to 228,000 people by 2043.

The age of the community is changing with the highest birth rate in London, and a large proportion of young people. Barking and Dagenham has the highest proportion of under 16-year olds in the UK. The borough becomes more diverse each year with 66% of the resident population identifying as coming from black and minority ethnic backgrounds compared to 19% in 2001.

Barking and Dagenham had the highest overall deprivation score in London and 17th highest in England (IMD 2019; MHCLG). People in the borough die earlier, have poorer health and lower levels of education and skills than across London whilst too many residents are in low paid work and struggle to find suitable homes they can afford. Unemployment remains high. Nearly 3 in 10 dependent children in the borough live in a lone-parent household above the national average.

Given the context of Barking and Dagenham, the impact of COVID-19 is immense. At the time of writing, 265 of our residents have lost their lives to the Coronavirus. Up to half of working residents were either furloughed or in receipt of self-employment support.

The number of residents in receipt of Universal Credit has more than doubled, with over one in ten residents now receiving welfare support.

Our child population

Barking and Dagenham is a young borough, with around 63,400 children and young people under the age of 18 - 30% of the total population, the highest proportion in the UK.

74% are from ethnic minorities and the proportion of children and young people who speak English as an additional language is more than 2.5 times than the

national average. This level of diversity is even more prominent among the younger population, where almost three in four children are of a BME heritage. This presents its own challenges when working with families and young people, where a better understanding of cultural subtleties becomes crucial.

26% of children under 16 in the borough are living in low-income families, an increasing proportion, and way above England average of 18%. The proportion of children entitled to free school meals in nursery and primary schools is on par with the national average, but the proportion in secondary schools is higher at 17% compared to 14% across England.

Domestic abuse is a significant issue in Barking and Dagenham and impacts on all service areas - 14.8 domestic abuse offences per 1,000 people - highest in London. It accounts for 37% of violence with injury offences in the borough and is a presenting factor for around 22% of children's social care contacts annually and rising.

The number of children and young people with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHC) have significantly increased, rising each year from 1,232 in 2017 to 1,655 in January 2020, a real term increase of 34%. This is an exceptional increase. This demand is continuing in year with the current number of children with an EHC plan at 1,883, an extra 228 children and young people. Autistic Spectrum Disorder, Severe Learning Difficulties, Speech, Language and Communication Difficulties and Social, Emotional and Mental Health are amongst the most significant health needs for children in Barking and Dagenham.

As at the end of 2019/20, a total of 2,349 children and young people were receiving a service as a Child in Need; child subject to a Child Protection Plan; child in care or young person leaving care, a lower number than 2018/19 (2,536 children). During the early months of 2020/21, and the first national COVID-19 lockdown, contacts and referrals were lower as were numbers of children in need and children coming into care. The number of children open to social care, therefore, fell in the first half of the year but since schools re-opened in September, we are seeing demand rising. As at the end of November, we have an extra 198 children in the system at 2,439 compared to the Q2 figure of 2,241 children.

This sits in a context of an ever increasing stretched and challenged health and social care economy, struggling to keep pace with changing community needs and the fast-growing child population with increasing diversity and complexity. This is also on top of a global pandemic this year that continues to place significant pressure on the Local Authority, all partner agencies, the community, and children, young people, and families across the board.

Despite the challenging context, the Council and elected members are ambitious and aspirational in their commitment to improving the lives and outcomes of our residents as set out in the borough's Corporate Plan 2018/2022: No-one left behind.

2. Key messages from our Self Evaluation

Leadership and Management

- A challenging year, that has seen unprecedented demand in some areas of our services for children, including front door, children in need and those on plans for protection, and those with SEND and disabilities.
- Investment from our corporate colleagues to help us keep up with unprecedented demand levels, which has resulted in higher than desired caseloads especially in front end of system and SEND / children with disabilities.
- A robust response to COVID-19 premised on our culture of putting the needs of the most vulnerable first, honest conversations, robust risk management and creating the conditions to work together as a team and with partners.
- COVID-19 has exacerbated our systems and strengths and challenges, and in some areas transformed the way we work for the better, especially with partners such as health and embracing technology in our ways of working.
- We continue to build a culture and conditions of a place where staff want to be and do their best. Ensuring we are child focused, build on and celebrate strengths, are honest about our challenges and see the strength of working together to deliver child and/or vulnerable adult centred support and challenge.
- Seeing the benefits of this through increasing permanence in our workforce, good morale and services that have remained safe and resilient throughout COVID-19.
- The next stage of our improvement journey will be focused around understanding and improving the lived experience of children and families, and understanding what difference we have made as leaders, managers, and workers, through our new approach to quality assurance being implemented in the next 12 months.
- As leaders, we are cultivating an ethos of compassion and kindness, relational working, and sense of accountability, underpinned by safe and effective partnership working and service delivery arrangements, to help us achieve our ambitions for local children and families.

Early Help

- Early help continues to be priority for the children's improvement agenda, and although there has been progress on improving processes and strengthening management oversight, we continue to not see the improvements in children's outcomes, support, and demand.
- We have commissioned, jointly with Corporate, a review of the local Early Help arrangements. This will conclude in February 2021 and inform next steps in line with the local arrangement.

- A joint plan with corporate colleagues is in the process of being agreed that will deliver robust improvements in Early Help.
- A whole system's Early Help and multi-agency working arrangements is a priority of the new Safeguarding Partnership. Building on learning from our work regarding Domestic Abuse, to inform our approach.

MASH, Assessment, and Intervention

- MASH has returned to Children's Care and Support following a three-year tenure in the Council's Community Solution service. Its return in July 2020 has been swiftly followed by a restructure to increase capacity and realign to Children's Services, underpinned by a rapid improvement plan.
- MASH has seen some improvements in processes, compliance and consistency of decision making and stronger management oversight since its return with aspirations for the service to be the threshold expert and provide intelligence to drive the safeguarding system issues and improvements.
- The Assessment and Intervention service has significant distance travelled since the 2019 Ofsted inspection with improvements in practice, caseloads and greater stability and capacity of workforce, against conditions of high demand and the COVID-19 context.
- The pre-birth team continues to provide specialist capacity to oversee one of our most vulnerable group of children and parents, leading to improvements in early permanence, robust safeguarding and stronger interfaces, pathways, and relationships with key partners such as midwifery, with plans to strengthen further with the reconfiguration of our health visiting service.
- Audit shows quality of practice, assessments, strategy meetings and thresholds continue to improve, and consistency in practice continues to be a priority.

Children in Need or subject to a Child Protection Plan

- Conditions of unprecedented levels of demand are not conducive to improvement, arising from several factors including increased community needs pre and post COVID-19, rising numbers of vulnerable children and families being placed in the local area by others, and work still to do to strengthen the local early help service and infrastructure which is not impacting on demand.

2. Key messages from our Self Evaluation

- Although getting better, with ongoing improvement in variability and consistency of practice, planning and intervention - children in need continues to be a practice improvement area, across children's care and support and its partners.
- Enhanced management oversight across child protection services with introduction of several panels, strengthened joint working and communication with child protection chairs and regular deep dives is enabling more consistent practice and improving quality of outcomes.
- Work to strengthen whole system oversight of children with disabilities and their safeguarding needs, including the setting up of a complex case panel and interface with safeguarding board and partners, particularly about neglect.
- Going from strength to strength in the development of multi-agency working around domestic abuse, a persistent feature of our community, including a new strategic partnership with Refuge, introduction of Stronger Together and ongoing review of practice, through initiatives such as Domestic Abuse Commissioning and a review of MARAC.
- Building on our learning from domestic abuse improvements, using the learning and approach to reinvigorate our approach to neglect, especially partnership working, and our early intervention offer. This is a key priority of the new Safeguarding Board partnership. We are seeking to identify a strategic partner and our revised quality assurance thinking to drive and shape improvements in this area.

Vulnerable Adolescents

- Continued investment in partnership and operational working arrangements to deliver a whole system and specialist approach to safeguarding and risk management of adolescents. This is underpinned by evidence of trauma, older neglect, and contextual working, and regularly reviewing what works and how do to things better to improve consistency of practice.
- Adapting our approach to respond to the challenges of practice, which in this area has substantially changed the landscape of risk and how we need to work together.
- Contextualised multi-agency working arrangements across adolescents including youth violence, child sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation, missing, children missing education, elected home education, Prevent and interface with the Youth Offending Service. A strong Multi-Agency Sexual Exploitation (MASE) Group and Criminal Exploitation Group (CEG) that have remained distinct to ensure risk and

- issues get equal focus, as well as exploring areas and young people that overlap.
- Step up Stay Safe programme goes from strength the strength providing the vehicle for strategic and operational join up of support to young people and schools. This is underpinned by robust partnership working and innovation leading to improved, joined up work with young people, universal and specialist services, and voluntary sector resulting in interventions that reduce exclusions and improve at risk behaviour.

Children in Care and Permanence

- Focus on permanence continues to be the cornerstone of our approach to ensure children come into care only when they need to and in a timely and planned way.
- Practice improvement continues although consistency and variability remain a priority. This is set against a trajectory of improving practice as identified by audit, good stability, and sustained performance in adoption.
- Innovative and exciting Specialist Intervention Service continues to develop interventions that reflect children, young people and community needs to help keep children in their families or return home.
- For those children in care, a strong in-house fostering service supported by the Mockingbird programme continues to keep placements stable and responding to the variety of needs of our children, with stronger Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) footprint evident.
- We continue to respond to the diversity of children in care population including upskilling the workforce to better support our unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC). Also, in our anti-racist practice developments, ensuring our care offer understands and meets the needs and experiences of our black and ethnic minority children and young people in care.
- Further work to do, but continued improvement in our partnership working, with education and health outcomes improving. A health led overhaul of our initial health assessment and reviews has led to significantly improved performance.
- Lead Member led Corporate Parenting Board going from strength to strength with honest conversations with children, young people, foster carers, and partners resulting in better understanding experiences, what needs to be different and agreed actions for improvement.

Care Leavers

- New care leaver service that is young person centred in capacity and processes and

2. Key messages from our Self Evaluation

and celebration of their achievements.

- Continuing to work to support our most vulnerable care leavers, including increased communication through virtual ways of working, exploitation and safeguarding oversight and intervention.
- Increased investment in our enhanced local offer underpinned by better internal and external partnership working including Community Solutions, housing, inclusive growth, and brokerage with aspirations to work towards Care Leaver Covenant.
- Continuous improvement plan that reflects our strengths and challenges of our offer and practice following a helpful and inspirational visit from the National Improvement Advisor for Care Leavers – Mark Riddell owned politically and operationally at the highest level.

Voices

- Good progress in strengthening consistency and visibility of child voice and lived experience.
- An active and greater presence of children in care council in our improvement and corporate parenting work including shaping virtual ways of working.
- Young people voices and experiences shaping our strategy and ways of working to big local and entrenched issues such as domestic abuse and structural racism.
- Embedding good communication with our workforce in our ways of working, keeping up morale, listening and responding to their views on our strengths and challenges.
- Proud of our work to share experiences and deliver tangible action that challenges and shapes our approach to anti-racism experienced by our workforce and service users across the whole of children and adults care and support service.

Performance and Quality Assurance

- Quality Assurance is adequate but enabled us to achieve the first aim of our improvement programme to get the basics right, to test and assess the impact of changes we have made. However, quality assurance is not sufficiently driving the improvement and ambition to be consistently good or better in all areas of practice.
- We are undertaking an overhaul of our approach to quality assurance to ensure it

is embedded in the lived experiences of children, their progress, outcomes, and the difference we make to their lives.

- The next 12 months will see us begin in our whole system realignment around understanding and progressing the lived experience, improving outcomes and what difference we made.
- Our approach will look at the child's journey across risk, assessment, planning, intervention, direct work and visits, review, and oversight.
- Our plan is that this approach extends wider the children's social care, to multi agency working, SEND and adults with plans in place to achieve this ambition.

Headline Plans for the next 12 months

- Tacking the fall-out from the pandemic and moving to recovery and then legacy planning – much of which is still emerging as we see the effects of the pandemic manifest in our communities.
- Move from the 'first-phase' Improvement Plan ('Getting the Basics Right') to the new phase two improvement plan that is focused on delivering outstanding services.
- Implement our new Quality Assurance Framework and the Care and Support Centre of Practice, setting the foundation for the next phase of our improvement journey.
- A joint plan with corporate colleagues is in the process of being agreed that will deliver robust improvements in Early Help.
- Develop further and embed our multi-agency safeguarding partnership arrangements – including a redesign of partnership (and Council) Early Help Services, ensuring more children and families get the right, targeted support early enough and are kept safe; and responding to the findings of the Domestic Abuse Commission.
- In response to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and a re-focus on the area of anti-discriminatory practice, to ensure that matters of race, culture, diversity and disproportionality are considered in both case planning and staff support. This needs to be reflected in all forms/case notes/ supervision notes/panel forms and management reports.

3. Leadership and management: now and the future

Effective and adaptable leadership and management during COVID-19 that put our most vulnerable children, families, and residents at the heart of our response.

The past 12 months has undoubtedly been one of the most challenging periods for public service that there has been. Whilst the demands of responding to the pandemic have tested many of our services to their limits, it has also brought out the best in many of our services. The directorate is stronger than ever, led by the DCS, and has been recognised as such.

At the beginning of the pandemic a 'People and Resilience Silver Command', chaired by the DCS, was established to manage our response, and routinely report appropriate issues into a corporate Gold Command. The group convened each day for the first 6-weeks and then moved to thrice weekly until May from which point this has formed part of weekly senior leadership meetings.

The three objectives that underpinned all our work are:

1. Keep vulnerable children and adults safe including mitigating as best we can serious incidents and preventable deaths.
2. Keep as many services and settings operating safely.
3. Keep our workforce safe and in capacity.

As a result, every agenda has included items on safeguarding, vulnerable groups and emerging risks and issues. In Children's Care and Support, a daily 'COVID-19 Bronze Command' chaired by the Operations Director with Heads of Service and the Principal Social Worker was also established to grapple with operational service delivery.

As we moved to incorporating our response to the pandemic into our business as usual, a 'Schools Re-opening' weekly meeting was also established with the Director of People and Resilience, Directors of Education and Commissioning, key colleagues in Education, Public Health and Schools Human Resources.

There is also a regular meeting with Health colleagues, with the Director of People and Resilience, Operational Directors of Children's and Adults Care and Support, and key colleagues in Commissioning, Public Health, the CCG and NELFT.

The Children's Care and Support workforce has remained resilient throughout, with staffing levels remaining consistently above 80% - with the majority working from home, virtually. Duty arrangements have been effectively managed with managers and social workers on duty working in the office. The model remains that only those on duty come into the office balancing the safety of the staff with safeguarding children responsibilities.

We have not had to apply any of the easements afforded by the Government, choosing to maintain full business as usual. At the end of the first lockdown, we reverted to undertaking statutory visits face-to-face making less use of virtual visits. All statutory visits have been maintained throughout.

Our social care workforce report being well supported by managers with staff-safety and emotional wellbeing being given priority. We ensured that PPE was and is readily available, and each worker has had a personal COVID-19 risk assessment to identify individual needs and health risks.

Staff report that their managers are more accessible, and teams have been creative in keeping in touch. Managers have visited social care staff deemed more vulnerable due to living alone and being away from their families. Staff identified at risk of domestic abuse in the home have been supported.

Early on we produced a set of critical service operational procedures and guidance. Our critical priorities were that assessments, safety plans and interventions would be limited to the minimum face-to-face social work activity required to reasonably mitigate risk during the period of lockdown. This included prioritising our children in care and care leavers, ensuring stability of placements during this period.

Each child/family had a COVID-19 risk assessment completed on Liquid Logic, supporting us in deciding whether it was safe to maintain robust virtual contact or whether face to face visits were necessary. We also produced a set of guidance and standards outlining what good virtual working practices looked

like, supporting our social workers and practitioners to undertake quality, purposeful virtual work.

We have actively monitored performance and quality of practice through qualitative audit and weekly metrics, ensuring we have both the capacity to meet demand and are achieving the quality of direct work as set out in COVID-19 guidance. Our Principal Social Worker reviewed 100 virtual contacts against the standards and found many cases of quality virtual work being undertaken by social workers and practitioners. Further innovations in virtual working include attendance at virtual Court hearings, supporting virtual contact between children in care and their parents and virtual Child Protection Case Conferences.

We continued to drive forward our improvement agenda, with many of the strengths and areas for development being built on and/or exacerbated by COVID-19 conditions. For example, we significantly drove forward our work to tackle perpetrators within Domestic Abuse, and significantly enhanced the Domestic Abuse response – including a weekly MARAC via conference call - allowing a quick response to high-risk domestic abuse. Our strong relationship with schools and other, enabled us to build a strong case to secure an extra 800 laptop devices on top of the 700 the DfE had originally allocated to vulnerable children with social workers in Barking and Dagenham.

We have worked hard to develop a strong “children’s services” culture in Barking and Dagenham in the last few years, one premised on openness, building relationships and working in partnership with key partners, including, schools, health, police, and the wider council. As a result, overall, we have seen excellent joint working across social care, health, schools and Community Solutions to support vulnerable families. Relationships with some of our key partners has arguably never been stronger during this emergency response and many historical barriers and bureaucracies have fallen away, laying the path for stronger, more genuinely integrated service delivery and common understanding of shared challenges and the roles we play in the lives of our most vulnerable children and families.

Responding to subsequent lockdowns has felt smoother given that we had not made any significant changes since our initial response. Work remains a hybrid of ‘at home’ and ‘in the office’ (on duty days), with guidance being reviewed and updated continuously.

It is fair to say, however, that staff are beginning to report fatigue: mainly with the demands that virtual working brings, as well as fatigue from not being able to work ‘normally’. Increased testing and track and trace has increased the number of staff self-isolating, which has impacted on staffing capacity, but this is being managed effectively and we are meeting all our responsibilities.

The Family Time Contact service has also found it a challenge to provide the level of positive contact between children in care and their family members due to the restrictions. This has begun to improve, and we are now trialling the use of other COVID-secure council buildings to facilitate those sessions.

Morale remains generally high during such challenging times and social workers are positive about working in Barking and Dagenham with recruitment and retention stronger than ever. However, the levels of demand have been a common feature in the second half of the year, particularly playing out in the MASH, children undergoing assessment, children in need, and those with disabilities and special educational needs.

Creating the conditions of a place staff want to work, yielding significant year-on-year improvements in recruitment and retention, with an increasingly stable and permanent workforce across children and adult services.

We continue to build a culture and conditions of a place where staff want to be and do their best. Ensuring we are child focused, build on and celebrate strengths, are honest about our challenges and see the strength of working together to deliver child and/or vulnerable adult centred support and challenge. As a result, overall staff have reported that they feel supported and morale across the department has remained high. As leaders we are cultivating an ethos of compassion and kindness, relational working, and sense of accountability, underpinned by safe and effective partnership working and service delivery arrangements.

We are beginning to see the impact on a stable and permanent workforce which has been one of our most positive outcomes over the past 12 months. The DfE children’s social care workforce return (2019/20) shows a continued improvement across all key measures including a growth in our workforce; a continued decline in agency social work qualified workers; an increase in permanent employed workers and a lower turnover rate.

We have successfully converted many agency posts to permanent posts and reduced the use of agency staff at all levels including senior managers. Our agency rate has declined from 23% to 16% - the fifth consecutive year this rate has improved since 2015/16 (50%). Our agency rate is now lower than London (24%), statistical neighbours (20%) and in line with the national average (16%).

Excellent progress has also been made in reducing agency social workers down to 18% compared to 24% at the end of 2019/20 and 30% in the year before. Agency figures are still high in the Assessment and Intervention service at 28%, (compared to 40% at the same time last year) and 35% at the end of Q1.

We have grown our social worker capacity with 230 qualified social worker posts (227 FTE), of which 83% are permanent compared to 77% in 2018/19. Staff retention has again improved, with staff turnover decreasing to 15% in 2019/20 compared to 16% in 2018/19 and 18% in 2017/18. This is now below last year's London average (19%), the statistical neighbours average (18%) and the national average of 16%.

This growth demonstrates the council wide commitment to ensuring social workers have manageable caseloads, a case which has been made to our corporate colleagues and resulting in further investment, although against a backdrop of unprecedented demand which has impacted on caseloads in recent months, albeit with resources to meet demand. Average social worker caseloads have been lower than at the time of the 2019 inspection and are generally in line with or below target in most teams. However, in the latter half of 2020, demand and caseloads have increased in all areas, other than looked after children. It is important to note that the percentage of social workers with caseloads above team targets is increasing and high, particularly in recent months with the impact of COVID-19 affecting demand and throughput. Over half (71 out of 128) of case holding social workers hold more children than their team target: 55.5% of the workforce.

Caseloads are also higher and above target in our Family Support and Safeguarding (FSS) service with 35 (67%) social workers in this service having allocations above target of 1:17. The Family Support and Safeguarding service has been most significantly impacted by the pandemic. Step-down or step-across to Corporate Parenting has been impacted largely due to backlogs in care proceedings or child protection and children in need plans not ending as partners

were concerned to withdraw social work support from families at a time when families were not benefitting the oversight and support from universal services. In response, the Assessment and Intervention service held children for longer to ensure that FSS did not become overwhelmed.

We also helpfully obtained agreement to employ an additional social work team (above establishment) in this service to keep caseloads safe and manageable. This service is still managing high caseloads, as the new team comes online.

Caseloads in the Life Planning team (children with disabilities), which sits in the Disability Service, increased significantly in September and this demand is continuing. 248 children were open to this team at the end of November compared to 184 at the end of August – a real term increase of 35%. Average caseloads have increased to 24 from 18 over the same period. This increase in demand is COVID-19 related, with significant breakdown in families because of suspension of service delivery, respite, children not being able to be in school and increased risk factors such as domestic abuse. The DCS and Operational Director secured additional funding from Corporate to go over establishment due to the potential safeguarding risks and the complexity of children with disabilities. Additional social work capacity above establishment has been agreed to manage this risk and begin to reduce caseloads. Children with disabilities has been one area that has been particularly impacted by increased need in COVID-19 and an area, where children with high needs moving into the borough, has been a consistent theme of the practice landscape.

Innovative thinking to create a new dispersed working model across the council, capitalising on technology, co-designed with staff and residents.

Our new Corporate Plan (2020-2022) sets out the council's commitment to the implementation of *"a digitally enabled, truly dispersed model, which is less reliant on central offices and allows more of our staff to spend more of their time in the community, closer to residents"*. This model will be built around the reconfiguration of our buildings as resident-centred community hubs.

COVID-19 has taught us that we are all able to get a lot of our work done remotely with less reliance on offices. Moving to "dispersed" working means the council does not need the same number buildings. It gives us an opportunity to do something radically different with our buildings. We also recognise the that

we must balance this with the need for human connection and coming together face to face as a team. It is no longer about having a big office space available for everyone, but more about providing the right size office space with the right physical environment that is available at the right times. We are calling this our Secure Base.

We are creating spaces that are safe, confidential, and welcoming, and that make staff feel like they have a secure base in the borough as and when they need it. These spaces should not be built around desks or workstations (beyond specific desks for duty managers) but should instead provide flexible, informal, and comfortable spaces, alongside small confidential meetings rooms.

The community hub model will be built over the coming year. These hubs will be open, friendly, and easy to access. They will act as flexible bases for a range of council and partner services. They will combine a minimum universal offer and targeted support aimed at meeting specific local needs. They will be digitally enabled and capable of adapting to changing needs across the borough. The model must ultimately support those who struggle, can get help and support close to where they live – a place to go, a place to talk, a place to do, while also facilitating activity to overcome specific local challenges and issues.

Relentless focus on improving services and outcomes for vulnerable children, young people, and their families.

In the past two years, the DCS and the senior leadership team has led a reinvigoration of children's services approach that is anchored putting the needs of the most vulnerable children at the heart both strategically and operationally, and with an unrelenting focus on improving outcomes. The next phase of our improvement journey sees us moving beyond outcomes, to ensuring all improvement is centred around understanding and improving the lived experience of children, and understanding what difference we made as leaders, managers, and workers, so that we build on good practice and improve what is not working as we think it should. This, alongside the culture and conditions we have been building as a leadership team, will underpin the next articulation of improvement journey and our priorities as we move forward. As leaders, we are cultivating an ethos of compassion and kindness, relational working, and sense of accountability, underpinned by safe and effective partnership working and service delivery arrangements.

Given the pressure of the continuing pandemic we are proud to have maintained a business-as-usual approach and, also, continued with much of the transformation and improvement work across children's care and support, recognising both our strengths and challenges have been exacerbated over the period bringing both opportunities and barriers.

We have now fully implemented the Children's Social Care Target Operating Model, with all service restructures and new services operational, including the specialist Pre-Birth team, Corporate Parenting and Permanence Service and Specialist Intervention Service aimed at tackling the significant challenges of neglect, domestic abuse, and those on the edge of care. The Family Support and Safeguarding service, the Adolescent and YOS service and the Assessment and Intervention service have been operational for over a year. MASH has also moved back to children's care and support with single line of sight to the DCS and Operations Director.

Throughout this self-evaluation, you will see improvements in performance, quality of social work practice and improved outcomes in many areas with a clear analysis of strengths and areas for further improvement. We need to continue to build upon those foundations, to embed our practice model and new services and launch our new innovative Quality Assurance Framework next year.

The next big step in our improvement journey is our ambition and plans to create a 'Centre of Practice'. This will bring together a range of social care functions that are currently delivered in different places, in different ways and embed them in a single, coherent service block. These functions all contribute towards the same objectives: getting the right staff and keeping them; developing our staff, evaluating, and improving practice; and reviewing practice and delivering statutory duties.

Spanning Children's and Adults Care and Support; the Disability Service and Early Help, the 'Centre of Practice' will bring to bear the learning from all of those, creating a seamless, singular approach to our improvement activity. It will ensure a high-quality, stable care and support workforce that is consistently challenged; and learning from that challenge with the sole purpose of delivering services of the highest quality.

The DCS continues to chair and lead the Integrated Care agenda for children across BHR. This has led to improvements at both strategic and operational levels across health, police, and schools, with many more examples of better multi agency working, anchored in a shared commitment to improving safety and outcomes for children, although there continues to be much to do in this space.

Robust and effective performance is in place with plans to implement a new quality assurance framework focusing on the lived experience from April 2021.

We have an established performance management framework with daily, weekly, and monthly performance dashboards in place to help managers improve oversight, performance, and quality of practice.

This put us in a good position at the start of the pandemic and has helped us greatly to navigate the challenges of COVID-19, lockdown, and recovery. We introduced a comprehensive set of weekly performance metrics, to support leadership in responding at the very start of the pandemic. A workforce tracker was also developed to provide oversight on the impact of COVID-19 on our children's workforce. Both enabled weekly monitoring and oversight of the impact of the pandemic on key elements of demand and service delivery, alongside similar dashboards for our Early Help and Education services.

The Lead Member, the Leader and Chief Executive receive regular assurance through the quarterly *Assurance Report of the Director of Children's Services*; the focus this year has, naturally, been on the pandemic and emerging recovery issues. This report is sent to our Corporate Assurance Group and a formal briefing with the Lead Member, as part of our wider council challenge process. We continued to hold our established programme of weekly and monthly meetings between the Lead Member, the DCS and other Senior Leaders. In addition, during the first three months of the response to COVID-19 we contributed to weekly updates to Cabinet Members summarising the emerging issues in our services and our response.

We have continued with our Quality Assurance Framework using audit findings to inform improvements in practice and service design and track recommendations to ensure they are acted upon. Our monthly front-line manager practice learning sessions have continued with a focused programme aimed at improving the quality, confidence, and consistency of frontline practice.

We have produced a new and innovative Quality Assurance Framework aimed at measuring the lived experience of children, impact of social work practice and outcomes for children and families. This framework will go live in April 2021.

Strong governance arrangements, embedding leadership and challenge at every level.

Governance arrangements, both strategically and operationally, are robust and effective. We have an established programme of weekly and monthly meetings between the Lead Member, the DCS and other Senior Leaders and these have continued throughout the pandemic.

The monthly Children's Improvement Board chaired by the DCS drives progress against our improvement plans, focusing on the quality and impact of social work practice. This is informing our self-evaluation on a regular basis and enables us to focus on areas of practice in need of improvement or immediate scrutiny.

Scrutiny is also provided by a group of elected members through the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, with 2020 seeing a focus on children in care and care leavers.

High level challenge and support is also provided by the Chief Executive through Corporate Performance Group (CPG) and Corporate Assurance Group (CAG) – which receives a quarterly 'DCS Assurance Report'. The Lead Member, Leader of the Council, DCS, SAB Chair, Chief Executive and directors hold a quarterly meeting to consider both children's and adults' high-level safeguarding and workforce data, ensuring good understanding of performance and pressures on the system. In the case of YOS, there is also continued strong governance provided by our Community Safety Partnership.

Corporate Parenting has been reinvigorated with strong leadership, challenge, and accountability at every level as confirmed by the recent DfE care leavers improvement visit. Elected members are playing a leading role in championing the Council's aspiration for our children in care and care leavers with the Lead Member as Chair and three other elected Members. Our Corporate Parenting Board has good representation from Children's Social Care, Health, the Virtual School, Community Solutions including Housing, Homes and Money, Health, Commissioning and Education, as well as representatives from the Children in Care Council (Skittlz), and a Foster Carer representative. As recommended by the

DfE care leavers improvement visit, we will look to extend the membership of this Board to include Department of Work and Pensions and Probation.

The Children's Safeguarding Partnership – formerly the Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB) – has been in operation since 2019. In our originally published plans, we set out our ambitions for implementing the full range of the new partnership during 2020. The pandemic has delayed some of these plans, though work is now progressing well once more to catch-up following this hiatus.

The Independent Chair of the LSCB stepped down at the end of November 2020, and this has paved the way for the process of appointing an Independent Scrutineer for the Safeguarding Partnership. The Independent Scrutineer will act as the 'Safeguarding Champion' - the cornerstone of independent scrutiny – for our children, families, staff, and residents, working in concert with others whose roles and activities contribute to the whole-system of independent scrutiny. We expect to advertise for this appointment in January 2021.

Safeguarding Partners have recently produced their first Annual Report. This report, to be published in Q4 of 2020/21, will review the work of the SPE for its' first year of operation – albeit a year of operation in the most unique of circumstances – and, crucially, set out the priorities for the next year. This report will be presented to Corporate Assurance Group, Cabinet and the Health and Wellbeing Board prior to publication.

Serious Case Reviews (SCR)

We have had one referral to the National Panel this year, but this did not meet the threshold for a SCR as abuse or neglect was not a factor in the death. Currently, we have no ongoing SCRs with all outstanding work concluded in line with the timescales as set out in the transitional arrangements for LSCBs of 29th September 2020. We have one local Practice Learning Review that has not yet started. An Independent Reviewer is being commissioned.

The two SCR's concluded have not yet been published due to ongoing police investigations. The Police, through the Safeguarding Partnership, has requested a delay to allow the work of the Police, CPS, and criminal courts to be processed. This has been communicated to the National Panel.

4. Early Help

What we know about the quality and impact of social work practice

To improve the quality, management oversight and impact of early help services, an Ofsted recommendation, a detailed operational improvement plan was developed and implemented over the last 18 months, developed jointly with DfE approved Partners in Practice (PIP) with Camden between September 2019 and September 2020. This has proved useful and led to several further operational practice changes within the Targeted Early Help service in Community Solutions.

Changes that have occurred included reduction in the size of Early Help teams with smaller manager to worker ratio and supervision is now becoming more regular. There has been greater use of audits and case dip-sampling to increase management oversight, but the practice remains too variable and inconsistent.

Social work management capacity has been increased. We have embedded a 'Daily Discussion' practice approach across the service, allowing practitioners to discuss children they are worried about with senior managers. This includes MASH decision makers once a week and a designated practitioner representing the child's needs. Feedback from practitioners is positive, with audits and dip sampling work indicating a stronger focus on outcomes, greater consideration of the child's lived experience and safeguarding arrangements.

Work to develop practice standards across the Targeted Early Help service is planned to support greater clarity on standards and expectations. We still have a way to go for impact to be consistent. Regular and well attended step-up/step-down meetings have been enhanced with warm handovers and bespoke joint working across services ensures continuity of support for families.

An Early Help Consultation line has been set up so that professionals, families, and carers can have direct and easy access to an Early Help Advisor. Feedback from residents is that this is connecting them to early help services quicker and where appropriate linking families to community based voluntary organisations at the point of initial enquiry.

A higher proportion of children and families are now more involved in assessments and reviews of support plans. Over 90% of children open to Targeted Early Help have an Early Help Assessment and three quarters of children have had a Team Around the Family (TAF) meeting. Work is ongoing to improve the attendance to TAF meetings and ensuring that all plans are reflective of children's needs.

We consistently seek feedback from families and children at the end of support interventions. Overall, feedback is positive with children and families telling us that the support has helped them become stronger and more resilient. We need to reach a larger number of families and a priority is to increase uptake.

During COVID-19 the Targeted Early Help service remained resilient and workforce capacity was strong. All families open to Early help had a COVID-19 risk assessment and a top priority was to provide an extensive help offer to families in temporary accommodation, asylum seekers, families shielding and children awaiting school places. The help offer included welfare visits, joint working with the voluntary sector and signposting to other sources of support.

The significant work on improving practice process, has not yet yielded significant or substantial improvement in practice or outcomes, and early help remains an area of enhanced scrutiny by the DCS and Children's Improvement Board.

A priority of the new Safeguarding Partnership board is the development of our whole system's approach to early intervention, help and multi-agency working especially regarding neglect. The pandemic has served as an opportunity to understand the interface of our Early Help offer and that of the voluntary sector, as well as the cohort of children and families who were shielding due to being clinically vulnerable, but additionally barriers such as reduced capacity within health operationally and strategically, as well as disruption to schools and adapting practice to respond to children being at home, have also slowed progress in this area.

We have continued to review how we can strengthen early help, with particular focus on strengthening support to where children are, such as in universal services. This includes building on our work through the Early Years Academy to amend our health visiting offer, developing our approach to support to children

in primary and secondary schools, and re-looking at how to best support children with disabilities in their communities, early and better. For example, we have Team around the School (TAS) pilot is near completion and evidencing improved targeting of children. Our education inclusion service developed vulnerable pupil trackers with all schools submitting trackers to their EIP on a weekly basis since September. This has identified vulnerable pupils' attendance, behaviour, and exclusions and where appropriate shared with Targeted Early Help and social care. We also have a weekly vulnerable pupil hot clinic comprising of our Education Safeguarding Lead, YOS Manager, CAMHS Lead and Universal/Targeted Health Leads. Professionals from social care, Early Help and YOS have an opportunity to refer to this multi-disciplinary team and problem solve 'blocked cases' of vulnerable children predominantly not engaging with education. This mechanism enables a joined-up approach between Education and YOS/Social Care and eradicates where possible the gap of intelligence that previously existed.

Next steps for Early Help.

Although progress has been made in the Early Help improvement plan, a number of performance and practice concerns persist and arising from enhanced scrutiny from both Children's Improvement Board and safeguarding partners. As a result, given the different configuration within the Local Authority where Early Help sits out line management and responsibility of the DCS and Children's Services system, we have worked with corporate and internal audit to commission an independent assurance exercise of the Local Authority Early Help service and its interfaces. Given the pandemic, and emerging context this feels particularly important. This exercise has been requested by the DCS and Lead Member for Children's Services and is supported by the Chief Executive.

It seeks to provide assurance of the current arrangements, highlight areas of strength and weakness, and help us set out our next steps. The review sits in a wider context of improvements needed to multi-agency universal and early help services, including improvements in health visiting, portage, support in schools, MASH and especially in relation to the Ofsted recommended improvement area of childhood neglect and learning from local serious case reviews.

We have appointed an independent reviewer with work commencing in January 2021. The final report is expected to be completed by the end of February 2021.

Positive Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) visit on 16 -17 homelessness demonstrating improved protocol and practice.

In our ILACS inspection in February 2019, Ofsted reported that “referral pathways for homeless 16- and 17-year-olds were not understood by partners, resulting in an inconsistent response”. In response, we have published a new 16 - 17-year-old homelessness protocol in line with national guidance, including clear referral pathways for partners. It is evident this protocol is leading to a change in our approach to homeless young people, with a focus on needs driving provision, rather than provision driving action.

The MHCLG visit on homeless 16- and 17-year-olds took place in November 2020 and feedback was very positive recognising our significant improvement work in this area. The MHCLG commented on our “open and forward thinking, seeing passion right across the board which was a testament of how far we have come”.

Our plans for the next 12 months to maintain and improve practice

- Complete the Early Help Assurance Review.
- Develop and deliver the Neglect and Early Help Improvement Programme incorporating the Early Help Assurance Review recommendations.
- Report on Team Around the School model pilot and implement recommendations.
- Produce the partnership Neglect and Early Help strategy.
- Reconfigure and launch the Early Years and 0-5 Health Visiting model.
- Building on multi agency working education, Targeted Early Help and social care.
- Implement recommendations made by MHCLG through a 16-25 vulnerable young people housing delivery group.

5. MASH (front door), Assessment, and Intervention

MASH is now back in Children’s Care and Support and strengthening the front door with improved partner engagement is a top priority.

In July 2020, our MASH moved from Community Solutions back to Children’s Care and Support: a move made to strengthen safeguarding practices and to

ensure MASH activity is in the direct sight of the DCS and Operations Director of Care and Support. MASH is now managed by the Head of Service for Assessment and Intervention.

A restructure of the service took place at the point of transfer to align it with Care and Support service structures and to increase management capacity. Early diagnosis highlighted that although timeliness of decisions was good, there were some concerns.

A rapid improvement plan has been put in place, including day-to-day oversight by the service manager; dip-sampling activity; increase of staffing capacity and engagement with partners, and which includes both DCS and Lead Member oversight. It is expected that this is a substantial improvement journey that will take approximately one year to conclude with aspirations for greater multi agency presence and that becoming the threshold expert with its pulse on safeguarding issues within and providing insight into how the system needs to respond accordingly.

At the peak of the lockdown MASH reported a reduction in contacts and referrals, a trend mirrored across London. However, with more children and young people attending school and lockdown easing in June, the number of contacts and referrals increased to pre-COVID levels. Throughout the pandemic period we have seen an increase in physical chastisement referrals, domestic abuse incidents and referrals where parental mental health was of concern; this is unsurprising given the circumstances and we have worked well with schools so they can confidently report disclosures of abuse and harm.

Since November we have seen a surge in demand in the front door: 1,265 contacts compared to the usual average of around 1,000 and referrals increasing to 404 (usual average of 290). The contact to referral conversion rate in November increased to 32% (above average of 29%) and the referral to assessment conversion rate increased to 99% in November (above average of 94%). This rise in demand in the MASH has impacted on the number of children open to Care and Support – increasing to 2,439 at the end of November – an extra 198 children in the system with the majority of those undergoing a statutory assessment – placing considerable pressure on the Assessment Service.

This increasing demand is being managed well in the MASH, with decisions being made in a timely way as are decisions to initiate s.47 investigations.

On average over 90% of contacts are being completed within 24-hours and feedback to the referring agency is at 90%. The repeat referral rate has remained stable at 13%.

Our challenge is to keep practitioners from becoming process driven and engaged in the work whilst maintaining the speed of allocations. We recognise that the number of contacts that are 'MASHED' remains too low, as well as the timeliness of MASH checks being returned.

Escalation practices have been reinforced and key partners escalate referral outcomes they are concerned about in a timely way. Routine dip-samples and peer audit sessions also contribute to continuous learning and development of practice. Individual supervision is regular and timely.

Feedback from the Head of Service and MASH Manager is that the quality of contacts and referrals is improving, although still variable. The Police partnership forum has led to an improvement in the quality of MERLINS received by MASH following training sessions and sharing of good practice. The recording of child/parents' contact information and safeguarding risks to the child and safety plans are now more regularly included in Police MERLINS.

Our plans for the next 12 months to maintain and improve practice

- Embedding multi-agency thresholds and offer across targeted Early Help, social care, and the wider partnership.
- Implement MASH restructure to enhance capacity of social workers and managers to support the quality of practice and managerial oversight.
- Deliver the MASH improvement plan post restructure and with extra capacity secured.
- Re-energise the MASH partnership and membership, building stronger ties with education, housing, and pre-birth team. This will be supported by the introduction of a daily MASH discussion for the most vulnerable children.
- Continue to strengthen the interface between the Front Door (including MASH) and Early Help through weekly step-up consultations.
- Improve system for feed-back to agencies and communication in general.

- Work with Police and domestic abuse provider on implementing a daily Merlin triage for contacts regarding domestic abuse.

A stronger Assessment and Intervention Service, with quality of practice and assessment improving.

The Assessment and Intervention service improvement plan has been implemented, with high caseloads addressed and strengthened management oversight. The service is now increasingly stable, and we have been successful in recruiting permanent social workers and managers across all teams. The turnover of staff has significantly reduced. All but one manager is now permanent, and we will be at 100% by February 2021.

Over 70% of social workers in the service are permanent compared to 60% at this time last year. Work is in train to reduce the use of agency social workers further, but this direction of travel is good given challenging times.

This has had a positive impact on morale and an improved culture of compliance with quality. Caseloads have continued to remain manageable and below the target of 20 (although we are reporting an increase in December), enabling the service to resolve issues in a timely way by implementing short interventions and preventing children from needing longer interventions.

So far this year, 2,272 assessments have been completed, lower than this time last year due to the early impact of COVID-19 and fewer contacts and referrals. Timeliness at 45 days is very high at 91% and above all comparators and a considerable improvement on 2019/20 end of year figure of 77%.

The quality of assessments has continued to remain high throughout the year despite the challenges. Under the stable leadership of permanent team managers, assessments are completed in a timelier way, shifting the average time needed to complete an assessment to 20-30 days rather than using the maximum of 45 days. Nearly half of assessments are completed within 30 days compared to 31% this time last year. Assessments are now reviewed at 20 days.

There is a strong culture of learning and development in the service. Staff are trained to use new models of practice such as the Graded Care Profile 2 and the Safe and Together model. The learning is shared and disseminated across the

service via forums such as the Consultant Social Worker forum, group supervision and lunchtime seminars, as well as service meetings. This has led to improved staff professional development and morale. Supervisions are regular (over 80%) and of good quality, supported by regular audit and peer-audit sessions where self-evaluations take place. This is co-ordinated by consultant social workers who also support the development of ASYE workers.

The interface with Early Help is better but continues to need strengthening. The interface with MASH has improved, resulting in more critical analysis, and planning of safeguarding responses.

The pre-birth team has been operational for a year, bringing changes to the quality of assessment, intervention, and care planning for high risk unborn and new-borns in the borough. Caseloads in this team are at 1:15 (above target of 1:12) and supervision is good (94%). We are seeing real evidence of improved early permanence with newborns progressing to CP Plans or Care Proceedings with robust safeguarding from the outset. The strong links with our Pause team ensures women at risk of losing repeated babies to the care system are identified early on.

Midwifery partners report a stronger partnership, clearer pathways, and improved satisfaction with our pre-birth offer.

Audit activity tells us that the quality of practice and quality of assessments are improving to good, with strong safeguarding arrangements being made for children. Issues are being identified early, assessments have good information and are analytical, and the voice of the children and families are clear within the assessments.

A transfer protocol is in place and the process for transferring children is implemented in a timely manner, with the emphasis on a positive warm handover. This year, due to COVID-19, this has been affected by capacity issues in the Family Support and Safeguarding service. In response, the Assessment and Intervention service held work for longer to ensure that the Family Support and Safeguarding service did not become overwhelmed.

Thresholds for social care intervention are generally appropriate with timely decision-making and proportionate responses. Child protection strategy

meetings are timely, children are seen quickly, and most include key agencies involved with the child.

Our s47 rate per 10,000 children has always been high, but this is now declining. The number and rate of s47 investigations declined from 1,277 (195 per 10,000) in 2018/19 to 1,047 (165 per 10,000) in 2019/20. Our current numbers are lower as at end of November compared to this time last year – 587 compared to 643, respectively. The percentage of s47 investigations resulting in NFA continues to fall, down to 6% as at end of November 2020 compared to 7% this time last year and 6.5% at end of 2019/20. We have a higher proportion of s47s progressing to ICPC now at 43% compared to 30% in 2018/19. Timeliness of ICPC's completed within 15 days of the s47 has improved this year to 82% compared to 75% at end of 2019/20 but further improvement is required in this area.

An externally commissioned audit covering help and protection in April 2020 reported that no children were unsafe or at risk of immediate harm and that thresholds were consistently well applied. Overall, compliance was high, recording in most children's files was up-to-date and assessments included a good range of information about children including information from other agencies. This is also being confirmed by our child protection chairs.

Out-of-hours arrangements continue to be effective. Interventions are timely and proportionate, and followed up by prompt recordings and liaison with daytime staff. Communication and handovers are well managed, resulting in continuity for children and families.

Our plans for the next 12 months to maintain and improve practice

- Continue to reduce the number of agency workers.
- Improve management oversight further by reducing the ratio of Social Workers to Managers (and adding an additional Service Manager).
- 'Get it right first time' by addressing issues in assessment robustly so that a sustainable plan designed with the family and partners reduces the need for longer, more invasive intervention.
- Embed the Pre-Birth Assessment Team and its partnerships with health colleagues, Pause and Early Help.
- Embed the use of the Specialist Intervention Service interventions.
- Create specialist Young People homeless assessors: 1 per team (5 in total).

- Improve attendance of Specialist CSA paediatricians at strategy meetings regarding child sexual abuse.

6. Children in Need or subject to a Child Protection Plan

At the end of 2019/20, the number of children on a Child in Need (CiN) Plan increased to 671, a real term increase of 18%. This demand is linked to the proportion of referrals progressing to assessment (95%), the overall increase in assessments being completed becoming CiN, and is reflective of deprivation levels in the borough.

Nearly half (46%) of our children in need are aged 10 to 17 (10% above the 10-17 population as a whole); 41% are White British and the majority are on plans for emotional abuse, domestic abuse, and neglect. There were 335 children subject to child protection plans at the end of 2019/20 – up by 7 children.

During COVID-19, we have seen rising numbers of children on child protection plans, including an increased number of transfers-in from other boroughs. This increase can to some extent be attributed to a hesitancy from partners to cease plans for children where the usual protective factors and step-down support has not been readily available. Numbers increased to a high 371 at the end of April this year but have now fallen to 337 as at end of November (still above average).

Most children (86%) are on child protection plans due to emotional abuse and neglect, and nearly half are White British.

What we know about the quality and impact of social work practice

In April this year, an external audit of children across help and protection was undertaken to assess our direction of travel. The audit was a desktop review of around fifty children due to COVID-19 and lockdown. Findings overall were positive with no children unsafe or at risk of immediate harm. Thresholds were consistently well applied, and no children were receiving a response at an inappropriate level. Compliance was high, and processes were followed through; core groups, case conferences and child in need reviews were held.

Most children were visited and seen regularly. Assessments had a good range of information about children including information from other agencies. The audit reported that there was a strong network of professionals and evidence of regular liaison between them. Fathers were generally included, and their importance acknowledged. Our response to the COVID-19 pandemic was evident in the recording with most children's files having appropriately completed risk assessments on the record.

Areas for improvement related to children in need not always being seen alone. Visits were not always purposeful, and plans needed further development to focus more clearly on children's needs, the change required to meet those needs and how the agreed actions will contribute to this. Further work is required on the analysis in assessments and needs to be consistent and a sharper focus on what needs to change. Child protection and child in need Panels' work is evident in some of the practice, but not consistently. Work is underway to strengthen practice in those areas and incorporated into our overall improvement plan.

The quality of management oversight and supervision is improving, with increased evidence of reflection and analysis.

Children in need continues to be a focused area for improvement. Children are being seen regularly with six-weekly visits improving to 93% at the end of 2019/20 compared to 73% in 2018/19. On average over 90% of children in need are being seen every six weeks. Performance has dropped slightly since September due to increasing numbers of children off school and families self-isolating, but contact is still made using virtual technology.

Three-monthly children in need reviews held within timescale is better at 94%, up by 7% on end of year. This is a positive improvement demonstrating enhanced oversight of children in need plans.

Social workers are becoming more reflective, know their children well and are being increasingly creative in their direct work with families, driven in some part by the pandemic. Some young people and families have responded well to contact via social media and have been more willing to share concerns and worries, resulting in social workers being able to take action to support them.

Overall, the increased stability of the workforce is resulting in more children and families having had a consistent social worker and team manager, leading to

positive relationships and improved outcomes. Supervision and management oversight continues to improve but remains variable across the service. Chronologies are being used to inform planning – over 50% of cases had a chronology updated within the last three months compared to 34% at end of 2019/20.

We are on the right track, but improvements need to be embedded and enhanced further in the coming year now we have a more stable workforce. We have developed a suite of one-minute guides for key areas to inform and improve practice, for example: permanence, management oversight and supervision, exploitation, homeless 16/17-year-olds, and police protections.

Our Permanence Taskforce and 9-months-plus Children in Need Panel are well embedded, tracking permanence with increased oversight of duration and effectiveness of plans. This Panel reviews all children subject to long plans or where the plan feels 'stuck' to provide management direction and support. Supervision Orders are also reviewed by this Panel to ensure timely planning to either extend or close. This leads to reduced urgent legal applications.

Despite the pressures of COVID-19, we have continued to progress children in need plans to either escalation or step-down. Regular 'deep dive' reviews of children in need are also undertaken, involving team managers and social workers to ensure the focus remains on progressing plans.

Learning audits are reporting gradual improvements in the quality of children in need planning and reviews, but it remains too variable. There is evidence that the Children in Need Panel is effective in improving the quality of plans, but not consistently enough. Audits also report some good multi-agency working but attendance at reviews still requires improvement.

To improve quality, we have revised the children in need plan to be more child and family friendly, focusing on what needs to change and how the agreed actions will contribute to this change. This is being piloted before rolling out in the spring of 2021.

Child protection practice is robust, and the quality of plans are improving to good.

Despite the rise in demand, children subject to child protection plans are progressed in a timely way. All children on child protection plans have had a 'COVID-19 Risk Assessment' completed to assess risk and make decisions as to when face-to-face social work would be required.

Performance on statutory visits (carried out virtually in most cases during lockdown periods) has been strong – around 95% of 2 weekly child protection visits have been in timescale, 100% for 4 weekly child protection visits from April to June 2020. With the easing of lockdown, schools reopening, and our return to more face-to-face child protection visiting, performance has dropped to 82% and 94% respectively. An increase in children and families self-isolating, staff self-isolating, and higher caseloads are impacting on performance currently.

99% of child protection reviews have been completed within timescale as at end of November - up by 3%. The proportion of children subject to a child protection plan for a subsequent time is at 15%, in line with the London average (but lower than similar areas). We also have lower rates of children on plans for two or more years at end of November at 4%. The timeliness of Initial Child Protection Conferences has also improved; up to 82% compared to 75% at year-end.

During lockdown, all Child Protection Conferences conducted via Microsoft Teams. Attendance from partners has increased, particularly from Health. No Child Protection Conferences have been cancelled due to COVID-19; all have been held virtually, quorate, and within statutory timescales.

We have increased the capacity in child protection chairs to four to manage the increase in numbers this year. Social workers and managers continue to value the pre-ICPC consultation with Conference Chairs which supports reflective practice and consistent application of thresholds. This is evident in the higher proportion of children that go to ICPC resulting in a child protection plan; 84% as at end of November compared to 78% at end of year 2019/20.

The majority (82%) of Core Groups held during the year have been within timescale - though performance needs to improve further. Core group attendance by key partners remains variable.

We have completed an increasing number of expert assessments earlier in the child protection process to support planning. This is experienced as less punitive by families and can result in reduced need for escalation to legal proceedings.

Our multi-agency Child Protection Panel reviews children who have been on Child Protection Plans for 11-months plus and these children are also tracked via the Permanence Taskforce. The Panel is well attended, and the impact is evident with the number of children on child protection plans for more than a year reducing and lower numbers of children on plans for two years plus. Audits report that the Panel is effective in reducing drift with a focus on resolving issues in a timelier way. The Panel has also been effective in addressing wider issues such as housing, the need for legal planning and the need for LADO referrals.

Audit activity also shows that child protection plans are improving to good quality but still variable. Children are held at the right threshold. The quality of supervision is improving and there is more management oversight recorded on cases. Team Around the Area meetings are being held with headteachers once a term, attended by Service Managers, providing an opportunity for schools to discuss pertinent issues and build links.

Disabled children are safeguarded and well supported.

Disabled children and their siblings are well supported by the all-age disability service managed in Adults' Care and Support. Disabled children and young people are safeguarded in line with safeguarding procedures and processes in children's care and support. The Head of this service is an integral part of Children's Care and Support leadership with clear oversight by the Operations Director and matrix arrangements around escalation and joint working across education, social care, and health, including interface with the new Safeguarding Board Partnership arrangements, with a focus on neglect.

The Life Planning team provides timely support to disabled children and their families, and work is underway to ensure consistency across the team. Multi-agency working is a strength. There are regular Complex Needs Panel meetings working with health colleagues and education to discuss complex children and ensuring health/CAMHS input, and most importantly, safeguarding oversight.

Regular Hot Clinics are taking place with CAMHS and social work practitioners. This has increased the engagement of CAMHS advice and input. There has been praise from the Court around the quality of social work practice, as well as positive practice alerts.

Since September, the number of children open to the Life Planning team has increased considerably and we know from our analysis that this rise is COVID-19 related, with significant family breakdown because of suspension of service delivery, respite, and increased risk factors such as domestic abuse. Average caseloads are now too high at 24 and 90% of allocated social workers in this team had above 20 children. On top of increasing demand, three permanent social workers have left the team due to securing promotions.

Additional social work capacity above establishment has been agreed corporately to manage this risk and to lower caseloads.

The LADO is effective and continues to ensure a timely and effective response to the allegations of harm involving those working with children or vulnerable adults. This strong practice has continued with the LADO raising awareness of safe recruitment and the allegation process with partner agencies as well as voluntary organisations. In addition, our Safeguarding Lead for Education, meets regularly with school safeguarding leads. This work has led to a wider understanding of the LADO role and increase in contacts.

Tackling the challenge of Domestic Abuse and Neglect with the pressure of COVID-19.

Responding to the entrenched challenge of Domestic Abuse and neglect in the borough remains both a considerable challenge and an absolute priority, even more so during the pandemic. A key concern is that high-stress home environments increase the likelihood of domestic abuse, and we have seen an increase in related contacts and referrals. We have significantly enhanced our domestic abuse response including a weekly MARAC via conference call allowing a quick response to high-risk domestic abuse situations and the safeguarding of both children and adults.

The launch of Safe and Together is beginning to impact on the way social workers and managers talk about, record, and intervene in respect of domestic abuse. So far, 40 social workers have completed the training, and the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. Practice discussion sessions to build on the learning are demonstrating the beginning of genuine culture change.

Since October 2019, Refuge has delivered domestic and sexual violence services in Barking and Dagenham, attracting 1190 referrals in their first year of delivery,

24.4% of which have been from children's services directly. The service offers individualised, trauma informed support, offering the best possible quality service to all victims and works alongside partner agencies, to ensure victims' needs are met holistically, actively involving survivors in service development.

The relationship with Refuge is strong, with regular attendance by Refuge staff at team meetings and the Child Practitioner Council to discuss joint working. Our Specialist Intervention Service offers a range of supplementary interventions aimed at keeping families together ensuring the right children come into care and improve early permanence planning.

We have commissioned Refuge to deliver targeted perpetrator work alongside our Family Support and Safeguarding service as part of their wider survivor and children's offer and we have access to a Men and Masculinities programme provided by Cranstoun. We also have access to Refuge's tech abuse team, a Google funded innovative new response to technology facilitated abuse. Our local project to improve access to legal aid for families experiencing domestic abuse achieved national recognition at the LAWWorks Pro Bono Awards in 2020).

Our Multi Agency Sexual Exploitation (MASE) and Criminal Exploitation Group (CEG) have representation from our domestic abuse commissioner. This has proved invaluable as we tackle the prevalence of trauma our young people have suffered through witnessing domestic abuse early in their lives, as well as increasing incidents of adolescent to parent violence.

The Independent Barking and Dagenham Domestic Abuse Commission brings together a panel of national experts, chaired by Polly Neate CBE, to look at how to tackle abusive behaviours in the borough. The first of its kind in the country, the commission's report is going to Cabinet in February and formally launched on 26th February 2021.

The recommendations are structured as seven survivor outcomes with what life should be like for survivors of domestic abuse – within each outcome are a series of steps in how to get there. Central to the commission's findings is ensuring that professionals across the system and wider community use the language "we believe you" to show that survivors of domestic abuse feel believed and listened to. The council is currently working through its response to the commission's Independent report.

We continue to strengthen our approach to neglect. In 2019/20, as part of our multi-agency neglect strategy action plan, our pre-birth assessment service was established, consisting of social workers, family support workers and a Health visitor. The team attend weekly perinatal meetings at the local hospitals ensuring multi agency planning and early assessment and interventions with our most vulnerable women. This has strengthened our ability to identify and respond to neglect much earlier on.

We have increased our family support worker capacity in the Specialist Intervention Service. Those workers support families with children on both children in need and child protection plans where neglect is a concern. Parents have shared with us positive experiences of the service and we have seen evidence of real impact where children and their families have begun to thrive. We continue to have a substance misuse specialist providing assessments of parents and facilitating onward referrals to specialist services.

Our East London Family proceedings court in partnership with the Tavistock invited us to sign up to the Family Drug and Alcohol Court model. We have now entered a two-year partnership aimed to offer strengthened assessments, access to specialist interventions and a court process that is inclusive of the parents and ensures early permanence of the child. We are excited to be able to offer this service to our families especially as over a third of our care proceedings involve children whose parents have substance misuse problems.

Training on the Grade 2 Care Profile continues with Portage, Early Help, Assessment and Intervention and Family Support and Safeguarding teams prioritised, with the aim of having these staff trained by March 2021.

The Vulnerable Children's Housing Panel is firmly embedded in practice and has resulted in less housing 'crises' for families as we have been able to work collaboratively with housing colleagues to put plans in place prior to families becoming homeless.

We have increased capacity of YARM (Youth at Risk Matrix) workers based in the YOS. They are linked to primary and secondary schools intervening early with the aim to address adolescent neglect and particularly those at risk of exploitation. Similarly, the vulnerable adolescent service aims to support young people and their families addressing adolescent neglect and associated vulnerabilities.

In September, the Safeguarding Partnership sought a local assurance exercise to be undertaken across each of the respective agencies, to ensure there were no children exposed to long term neglectful circumstances. Local action was taken involving in depth case reviews/audits, increased management oversight across our Early Help and Portage services, as well as facilitating several assurance workshops from Heads of service through to front line staff so to consider and disseminate the learning. Several immediate improvements being made in service delivery, such as upskilling Portage staff in the application of thresholds and escalation procedures.

Work has commenced in redrafting of our thresholds document and working with all partner agencies to establish a common understanding of the terminology, services offered and escalation pathways. Improved procedures for information sharing across Portage, Early Health and the Health Visiting service have been put in place.

Significant improvement is needed across our wider Early Help system, to improve our ability to identify and respond to neglect. This work will be directed by the Safeguarding Partnership, through the Early Help and Neglect Delivery group, who will be responsible for taking forward our plans.

We have also set up a multi-agency Child Sexual Abuse Delivery Group reporting into the Children's Safeguarding Partnership. This group is chaired by the Operations Director and has good representation across agencies. We have partnered with the Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual abuse who are delivering an intensive ten-month training programme for a cohort of staff across the child's journey, and two multi agency training days. This CSA Leads Programme aims to raise the profile of CSA, driving best practice, and partners being better able to identify, assess and intervene where child sexual abuse is a concern.

Our plans for the next 12 months to maintain and improve practice

- Embed and extend the Specialist Intervention Service offer.
- Continue the implementation of Safe and Together Domestic Abuse model.
- Work to improve areas of provision for the most vulnerable children, including services around the school.
- Deliver and embed the new partnership Neglect Strategy.
- Continue to roll out GCP2 across all service areas.

- Implement recommendations made by Domestic Abuse Commission.
- Stronger system oversight of children with disabilities and SEND.
- Building on our learning of how we are tackling domestic abuse to shape our whole system's approach to neglect, a key priority of both the local authority and the new Safeguarding Partnership.

Building on what we have learnt to strengthen quality of consistent practice, management grip and outcomes for children and families

- Permanence Taskforce: keeping a single oversight of early permanence for children across child's journey, seeking assurance there is no drift and delay.
- Develop and roll out an improved plan format for CiN and CP that focuses on what needs to change for the child/young person.
- Continue to improve the quality of supervision and management oversight.
- Continue to improve the use of chronologies and ensure they are up to date.
- Embed the One Minute Practice Guides to establish practice standards including supervision, management oversight and statutory visits.
- Review the system for child protection chairs/IROs to raise practice alerts with social workers and team managers.
- Ensure Independent Reviewing Officers and Child Protection Conference Chairs consistently undertake midway reviews.
- Use the CSA Leads programme to raise the profile of, and improve the response to, children who experience CSA.
- In response to the BLM movement and a re-focus on the area of anti-discriminatory practice, to ensure that matters of race, culture, diversity and disproportionality are considered in both case planning and staff support. This needs to be reflected in all forms/case notes/ supervision notes/panel forms and management reports.

7. Vulnerable Adolescents

What we know about the quality and impact of social work practice

The Adolescent and Youth Offending Service have been working as one service since January 2019. The Adolescent team covers missing children and exploitation. This team is stable and permanent with manageable caseloads at 1:11.

The team is beginning to promote and develop a culture of strong support and challenge, enhancing and enabling learning and development while keeping children and families at heart. The team includes a family therapist and is beginning to benefit from the support of our specialist intervention service offering restorative interventions and family group conferences, both needed to prevent young people coming into care.

The service has good professional development opportunities for workers with regular practice focus events, providing specific workshops through fortnightly good practice events. The whole service continues to embed relational and trauma informed work in its daily practice with an emphasis on building resilience in families including adopting a contextual safeguarding approach to ensure that children do not come into care unnecessarily.

Improved identification and tracking with strengthened multi-agency oversight leading to a timely response.

As at the end of 2019/20, the number of children missing from home and repeat episodes increased to 185 and 448, respectively. The number of looked after children missing more than 24 hours declined to 59 although repeat missing episodes increased to 247. This is not surprising given our growing number of challenging and complex adolescents. Identification and tracking are robust, and the increase is partly because of better processes.

COVID-19 lockdowns have presented both elements of protection and new harms for our vulnerable adolescents. In the first lockdown period, the number of children going missing from care and home reduced significantly with most children adhering to the lockdown measures. County lines activity and serious youth violence decreased, although evidence suggests the former may have been more covert. Police reported that drug dealers were using alternative means to distribute drugs and concentrated on London distribution. This may account for some of why our numbers of missing children reduced. Another factor contributing to the decrease in missing numbers is the increased nurturing

contact that YOS workers and commissioned partners have with young people and families.

As we emerged from lockdown, county lines, gang activity and serious youth violence has resurfaced in known locations. Over the summer the Police, YOS and Adolescent staff, detached youth workers and community safety unit undertook some targeted operations focussed on these more concerning areas such as Barking Station and the Gascoigne estate.

We continue to monitor missing children through our effective monthly multi-agency missing children operational panel (MCOP). This Panel has been further strengthened and now also considers looked after children placed in the borough by other authorities on a quarterly basis. We are developing a process for raising concerns with placing authorities to ensure that we have sight of relevant risk assessments, safety plans and return home interviews.

We are working with our police and local authority partners across East Area to align our MCOP procedures and to ensure improved information sharing, especially about looked after children placed cross-border with our neighbours.

We have worked with police and local accommodation providers to roll out the Operation Philomena protocol. This protocol aims to ensure that providers act as any “reasonable parent” would when children go missing. Although too early to tell, it is thought that this joint work with Police and Children’s Homes is contributing to the lower number of children going missing.

The daily missing children report continues to be circulated to the DCS and other safeguarding partners and includes children placed in LBBB by other authorities who have been reported missing to police.

We are currently strengthening our missing children grab packs and MCOP offers quality assurance through review of forms into Liquid Logic, oversight of social work activity and quality of return home interviews. The exploitation and missing manager chairs the MCOP and reports on the activity and outcomes of MCOP to MASE and the Exploitation and Contextual Safeguarding Strategic group.

Currently, there are 57 children open to the Adolescent team and average caseloads are 1:11. 31 young people are open for whom there were current CSE

concerns, compared to 30 at end of 2019/20. Supervision and management oversight have improved with the new specialist Adolescent team.

This team has access to a performance dashboard updated and circulated daily to managers, Head of Service and Operations Director to ensure oversight of all cases in the system. Audit activity and dip-sampling is part of regular practice alongside quarterly learning audit and is reporting good quality practice, with young people safeguarded well and a good understanding of risk and issues facing our adolescents. Feedback from IROs and CP chairs is also positive.

We have refreshed the CSE Risk Assessment tool and designed a CCE risk assessment tool to help with the assessment and safety planning for children at risk of becoming or current victims of both sexual and criminal exploitation. The new pathway for both assessment tools has two-step authorisation to ensure that team managers and the senior and strategic management group have oversight of our exploited children.

The Adolescent team manager regularly attends the weekly risk management panel held by YOS and information sharing between the two teams has improved. Joint working on children and young people has allowed for better planning and reduction of any duplication of work.

Improved contextual safeguarding approach for vulnerable adolescents supported by strong multi agency leadership.

We have significantly strengthened the partnership approach to safeguarding vulnerable adolescents. There is much for Barking and Dagenham to be proud of, with strong governance arrangements, innovative approaches to tackling exploitation and a wide range of partners playing a role.

A bi-monthly Contextual Safeguarding and Exploitation strategic group chaired by the Director of Operations is a multi-agency sub-group of the Community Safety Partnership. This group responds to some of the key priorities set out in the Community Safety and Knife Crime action plans and works to ensure coordinated multi-agency responses to children and young people experiencing criminal and sexual exploitation and serious youth violence.

A monthly Contextual Safeguarding working group manages the implementation of contextual safeguarding across the partnerships. Currently, a range of tools

developed by the University of Bedfordshire (UoB) in collaboration with Hackney are being tested in the borough. Despite COVID-19 slowing progress, school and neighbourhood assessments are underway, with our Community safety and Enforcement service starting to test the business surveys with a cohort of businesses based around transport hubs in Barking Town Centre. Peer assessments are also being piloted.

A series of regular table-top exercises to track contextual referrals that have come into MASH are used to identify learning, gaps, and any required system changes. A site project plan has been developed with the UoB outlining our work over the next two years to achieve and embed a contextual safeguarding approach across the Council and partnership.

We now have a robust and well established MASE and CEG - both tactical and strategic groups. Data and information shared by partners at both groups has enabled a greater understanding of the profile of our young people most at risk of exploitation in the borough. The meetings also focus on offenders, disruption activity and locations of concern.

Since lockdown, we have seen the average age of those at risk of sexual exploitation decreasing with online grooming becoming more prevalent. In response our exploitation manager and principal social worker have designed a training package in partnership with young people so we can strengthen the workforce knowledge and approach to on-line harm.

We are increasingly concerned about the rise in criminal exploitation amongst our Roma young people with evidence of trafficking. To address this, CEG has been instrumental in galvanising a joint police operation together with colleagues in Redbridge. County Lines training delivered by Henry Blake has strengthened the workforce understanding of the lived experience of our young people being exploited through county lines. Children are not removed from the CEG or MASE list unless agreed by all partners at the respective meetings. At the point of closure there is an analysis focused on understanding 'what worked'.

We have reported young people coming off the list within a year, following tenacious social work, an engaging protective parent and input from commissioned partners such as Safer-London being key to ensuring good outcomes.

The strategic group also oversees and informs our Step Up Stay Safe (SUSS) programme which focuses on working with schools to reduce incidents of serious youth violence, knife carrying and exclusions. We were proud to launch the Lost Hours campaign aimed at supporting parents and carers to understand the risks children and young people face and their responsibilities. This was well received through various social media platforms.

Another positive initiative under the umbrella of SUSS and evidencing some positive outcomes is Sparking Purpose – a KS3 12-to-24-week rehabilitation programme for pupils involved in serious youth violence. Those children are directed off site to North Star New school for the purpose of improving behaviour with the aim of successfully reintegrating pupils back into mainstream settings and avoiding exclusions.

We have an exploitation awareness programme delivered every six weeks, as part of our induction programme and this has been expanded to include youth offending and Prevent to ensure all areas of exploitation and adolescent vulnerability are well understood in practice.

Young people continue to play a significant role in our service development and are involved in all recruitment of staff. We also have a young person representative on the strategic YOS board who has made valuable contributions in bringing the experiences and voices of our young service users to our attention with the aim of informing future service developments.

We continue to receive feedback from children about their safety and issues of concern through our annual young people's safety summit which takes a contextual safeguarding approach to identifying safe spaces within the borough. The roll out of Tootoot and Tootmood will be a critical in collecting information about the wellbeing and emotions of primary age children in the borough. This feedback too will drive our efforts to ensure safer places and experiences for our young people.

A robust approach to CME and the education of vulnerable children.

Children missing from education (CME) is managed well in the borough and we have robust systems in place to track CME who move out of borough, and to locate children who live in the borough but are not on a school roll. This enables action to be taken to ensure CME are safeguarded and educated.

The manager for CME and Elective Home Education (EHE) is part of the MASE, CEG and MCOP, thereby ensuring good links with social care. Strong links exist with schools, and partner agencies, ensuring that there is good communication. Regular meetings take place between CME, EHE and Admissions managers to quickly resolve any children who appear 'stuck' in the system.

The number of children missing from education who reside in the borough is slightly lower at 71 at the end of November 2020 compared to 78 this time last year. For those taken off role, we use a secure online form for schools to comply with the regulations. Training is provided to schools and our procedures are under constant scrutiny to ensure 100% compliance.

We continue to be part of a group of local authorities involved in an information sharing agreement with HMRC, which helps us in locating children missing from education. We are part of a North East London cross-borough CME group which meets on a regular basis to share information and good practice. We regularly make use of the Health system to identify where a family may be living along with borough services such as the Tenancy Audit Team. In some circumstances, we ask the UKBA to confirm if the child has left the country, and where they have gone to. Our performance measures monitor the length of time all CME cases have been open, with targets to resolve cases within two months.

We have strong EHE procedures in place to prevent any form of coercion or 'off-rolling', including an agreement with schools of a cooling-off period if a parent decides to withdraw to EHE, and a child automatically being reallocated to their most recent school if they have been EHE for less than 3-months.

We make informal enquiries of the home education provision of all children known to us as being home educated. For committed, long term home educators, we offer an education adviser to see the child's work and make comment on it. Where appropriate, we encourage parents to enrol their child at a school. If a child continues not to be provided with a suitable and efficient education, we will arrange for a school to be allocated and will, if necessary, make use of the law to ensure enrolment.

Since September, the number of children known to be home educated has risen significantly due the reintroduction of statutory attendance regulations. This has been experienced nationally. Our EHE numbers have increased to 315 as at end

of November this year compared to 182 in November 2019, a real term increase of 73%. Fears about COVID-19 and concerns about health made up 45.5% of the reasons for parents deciding to home educate during this time. Weekly analysis has been taking place of the number of cases known to social care, the EHC Team and early help to ensure vulnerable children are safeguarded. We have recorded reasons for all new EHE children and engaged with parents who have cited COVID-19 as the reason for EHE to seek to return them to school.

We are a member of the Association of Elective Home Education Professionals (AEHEP) and attend the London group where knowledge and good practice are shared. Each month, we check the list of families being discussed at MARAC to confirm the education status of the children in each family. The CME/EHE manager and the Prevent Co-ordinator are working together to develop training and a leaflet warning about extremist grooming.

Robust partnership approach to Prevent and risks of radicalisation.

We are a Prevent priority status borough, as designated by the Office for Security and Counter Terrorism. We participated in a Home Office led Prevent Peer Review in March 2020 and this was very positive. Leadership, skills, and knowledge were key strengths with a strong appetite to improve and develop Prevent in Barking and Dagenham. Risk and threat were found to be well understood and acknowledged across the partnership and excellent work across the education sector was a particular highlight. Excellent progress has been made with the appointment of our Prevent coordinator, who has brought a high level of skills and knowledge to the borough. PEOs are highly commended and have developed an excellent suite of resources and innovative leadership models share accountability around Prevent which should lead to improved mainstreaming. We have also appointed a Community Engagement and Exploitation Officer who is delivering awareness training to VCSE, faith organisations, and Out of School Settings.

The Barking and Dagenham Prevent Strategy and Steering group (PSSG) operates well, understands risk, oversees delivery and is well-attended. The Prevent Partnership Delivery Plan is owned by the PSSG: good progress is being made.

The advice line within the MASH is valued by partners as a source of advice and guidance. The Barking and Dagenham Channel Panel meets monthly, chaired by

a senior manager, is well regarded by partners and is strong at addressing complex needs. The Prevent Peer Review found evidence of wide-scale training across partners, particularly staff in schools and those who work with young people, and this is tracked.

Key recommendations were to develop the CTLP and risk assessments using in-house expertise to better understand risk and drive the allocation of resources and programme; seek support in developing risk assessments and delivery plans; review governance structures for Prevent; develop schematic of referral pathway and ensure no delay in sending referrals to SO15; create a training needs assessment and develop a standalone communications and engagement plan. These have been taken forward and incorporated in our delivery plan.

Our plans for the next 12 months to maintain and improve practice

- Relentless focus and activity to reduce the risks of exploitation and the frequency at which some of our most vulnerable young people go missing.
- Complete pilot areas of development for Contextual Safeguarding with University of Bedfordshire and share the learning with others and continue to embed the contextual safeguarding approach.
- Implement a “Young People at Risk” plan to sit alongside the Child Protection process for children whose risk is from extra-familial harm.
- Develop the capacity to hold contextual conferences.
- Roll-out/launch refreshed CSE and CCE risk assessment tools, working with our CP Chairs and IRO’s to improve compliance.
- Launch refreshed MASE/CEG Closure Request form
- Evaluate the impact of the various approaches offered to young people and their families to better understand “what works”
- Develop transitions pathway for adolescents at risk of exploitation to ensure they receive appropriate support and services past their 18th birthday.
- Develop a process that ensures that children known to both the adolescent and YOS teams are supported by a single plan that incorporates work with both areas of the service, negates duplication, and is more meaningful to the families we work with.
- Roll out of training and risk assessment of children’s “online worlds”.
- Embed the pathway for YARM in the early help module of LiquidLogic to produce a useful data and performance dashboard for this service.
- Continue to deliver the YOS HMIP National Standards Improvement Plans.

- Implement Prevent Peer Review recommendations.
- Strengthen links to community, faith, and Out of School Settings.
- Develop a closer working relationship with Redbridge and Havering Prevent, following the BCU model, and in anticipation of regionalisation.

8. Children in Care and Permanence

Our children in care and care leavers

The number of children coming into care is lower: 111 children have come into care between April and November 2020 compared to 129 in April to November 2019. Our children in care numbers have, therefore, declined to 381 (60 per 10,000 children) compared to 402 at end of 2019/20 and 417 in 2018/19.

Our children in care are generally older with 71% aged 10-17, and 29% aged 16-17, both above national averages. More males are in care at 57% and White children are over-represented at 52% compared to 36% in the local under 18 population. Conversely, Black African, and Asian children are under-represented, making up 19% and 11% of children in care, compared to 25% and 22% of the under 18 population (2018).

What we know about the quality and impact of social work practice

A new Corporate Parenting and Permanence Service, further strengthening permanence and planning.

The Corporate Parenting and Permanence Service went live in April 2020. There are now four Corporate Parenting teams responsible for children up until the age of 18 and two Leaving Care teams responsible for care leavers aged 18 through to 25. This service will have a clear focus on permanence for children and improving the experiences and progress for children in care and care leavers.

The assessment of adopters, family finding, and post adoption support roles transferred to the Regional Adoption Agency (Adopt London East) in October 2019. The Council retained responsibilities for approving adoption care plans and are responsible for the children up until their adoption orders are granted.

These children are held within the Adoption and Permanence Team to ensure expertise is maintained for progressing adoption plans alongside ALE.

The new service has increased capacity and comprises of mostly permanent workers and managers. Caseloads are manageable at 1:15 and supervision is improving (around 85% on average).

Decision making for children who come into care is overall timely, planned, and appropriate.

The number and proportion of children coming into care on police protection has considerably declined year-on-year since 2014 and reduced further to 9% at the end of 2019/20. This is the context of falling numbers nationally from 11% to 10%; London has fallen from 16% to 12% and similar areas from 21% to 16%. As at the end of November 2020/21 17% of children in care have entered on police protection still below target and in line with London.

The number of children coming into care under section 20 remains in line with the end of year figure of 21%, and is well below London, similar areas, and national averages. The proportion of children on an FCO or ICO are above national, London and similar areas. An externally commissioned audit reported that threshold was appropriate for children on an ICO (April 2020).

Quarterly learning audits report an increase in the number judged as good overall with improvements in case work practice and increased management supervision. Evidence of regular supervision was found, and the quality of supervision is improving with reflective discussion and action planning noted in audits. Care planning quality is also showing improvement but remains inconsistent. Care planning in some cases needs to be tighter with clear milestones and time scales and chronologies need to improve.

We have increased investment in good edge-of-care services to ensure, where possible, children can remain at home with their families. Our new Specialist Intervention service went live in July 2020 and will help us tackle the significant challenges that neglect, domestic abuse and other factors keeping children on the edge of care pose. It brings together a range of existing edge of care services such as Family Group Conferencing, Restorative Intervention, Family Support, Therapy, Family Contact, Lasting Links, Group work and Substance Misuse under one Head of Service who joined also in July this year.

Despite being launched in the middle of the pandemic, the service is working with increasing numbers of children and their families. The service has worked hard to raise its profile providing consultation and bespoke support for some of our most vulnerable children. This service already has waiting lists due the demand for such good quality interventions, and the increasing demand in the system. Messages of appreciation for their input have been received both from parents and social workers using their offer.

Parenting and group work have been postponed due to COVID-19 restrictions, but we will recommence when safe to do so. Our Family Time Contact service has found it a challenge to provide the level of positive contact between looked after children and their family members due to restrictions. This has improved and we are trialing the use of other council buildings to facilitate these contacts.

The Pause team continues to work with our most vulnerable women who have lost children to the care system. The quarterly Pause Board heard how Pause practitioners have used numerous creative means to engage women throughout the lockdown periods, for example online cooking and art classes, delivering the ingredients and equipment hampers ahead of the sessions ensuring inclusivity.

None of the 18 women who have completed the Pause programme or who are currently engaged with the programme (10) have gone on to have further children. This is a significant achievement. Pause Practitioners and social workers have forged closer links, and have been able to share best practice, leading to an improved offer for both children and birth mothers.

Most children are placed within family settings with improved permanence practice and planning.

Most children (70%) are placed within family settings and 78% of children live in the borough or in surrounding boroughs enabling them to maintain connections with school, family, and friends – a positive outcome.

Placement stability is good with a lower proportion of children experiencing three or more placements - 7% (29 children) in 2019/20 compared to 10% (40 children) in 2018/19. Performance remains good and better than all comparators in this financial year at 9%. We are pleased with the improved performance on long-term placement stability improving from 66% in 2018/19 to 73% in

2019/20, higher than national, London and similar areas. Performance remains good, and better than all comparators in this financial year at 70%.

During COVID-19, ensuring stability of placements was a priority; early on, as lockdown was beginning, we identified foster placements that may be more at risk of breakdown because of the foster carers' age or health condition to provide additional support if required. We are proud that no placements changed because of COVID-19 and stability has been maintained.

We have a strong and well-regarded in-house fostering service that uses the Mockingbird programme to help keep children in their placements. The feedback from carers and children and the Fostering Network are extremely positive and our model is considered a national leader. There are no plans to increase the number of constellations in 2020/21 due to the impact on COVID-19, but in the latter part of 2021 a further two constellations are planned.

Our new Specialist Intervention Service are all impacting on placement stability positively. In 2019/20, we have moved the sourcing of placements into a brokerage function, and secured funding for an enhanced Fostering campaign to ensure we are better at providing the right placements.

An audit on placement stability was undertaken in Q2 this year. Support from supervising social workers was a key strength, highly valued by long term carers and having a positive impact on stability, as was the Mockingbird programme. The audit reported that family time contact with extended family is generally well supported. A key area for improvement related to developing the skills set of social workers in managing long term placements.

In our ILACS inspection Ofsted reported that early permanence planning was not well developed and that there was insufficient management oversight of the permanence planning process. We have made considerable progress in this area. Permanence planning is now stronger, our practice has improved, and we are continuing to consolidate and build on improvements to ensure early permanence and consistency through the monthly Permanence Taskforce.

The Taskforce ensures single oversight of permanence arrangements for children on child in need and child protection plans, young people remanded and in custody, children placed with parents, children on Section 20, supervision orders and awaiting adoption matches and orders. In short, the meeting oversees

permanence arrangements through the child's journey with the aim to achieve early permanence - no drift or delay for any of our children. A monthly Permanence Data Dashboard is now embedded in practice ensuring single oversight and challenge in this area. A quarterly permanence data analysis is also provided to ensure progress and improvements are being made.

Children in care achieve permanence through 'matching' and long-term foster care, family finding and adoption, a return home to live with parents or relatives, and through court orders such as Special Guardianship Orders and Child Arrangement Orders being granted. Permanence Planning Meetings are being held earlier in the process for all children in care, including pre-birth babies where removal at birth is being considered, to ensure forward care planning.

In 2019/20, 15 children achieved permanence through adoption (the same as 2018/19), representing 7% of all children leaving care - above London, but below the national and similar areas averages. Year to date number of adoptions is 7 (5%). We have had no adoption disruptions for the seventh consecutive year.

33 children (16%) have become subject to special guardianship orders (SGOs) – the same as 2018/19, and higher than all comparators. Year to date number of SGOs is 17 (13%). Of those where we have seen breakdowns, we have noted a larger proportion are of children placed by other boroughs with SGO carers in Barking and Dagenham.

Our adoption scorecard continues to improve. The average time between a child entering care and moving in with their adoptive family for children adopted decreased in the last 12 months from a three-year average of 504 days to 476 days. This remains above the nationally set target of 426 days but reflects improving practice.

Conversely, the average time between the Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child and deciding on a match to an adoptive family remained relatively stable with a three-year average of 241 days and 247 days over the last 12 months. This is also above the nationally set target of 121 days but does reflect to a certain extent the complex nature of some of the children placed in Barking and Dagenham.

The Permanence Taskforce continues to keep oversight of adoption and the adoption scorecard indicators tracking and understanding reasons for those

children who have been awaiting matching for long periods. Those waiting the longest tend to have complex health needs and be in older sibling groups. Only one adoption was delayed due to COVID-19 and this delay was managed exceptionally well by our play therapist and we are pleased that the adoption has now been finalised.

The first six months of the ALE has been challenging with regards to staffing and managing the transitional responsibilities. This is the case for Adoption agencies across the country. An increase in expressions of interest has been sustained since the service went live last October and this is continuing this financial year. We anticipate that this will increase the number of adopters approved in 2020/21. The campaign on recruitment of black adopters, although delayed from March to September because of COVID-19, has now commenced.

Children who are privately fostered are assessed in a timely way, visited regularly, and are living in suitable care arrangements.

IRO contribution to permanence planning for children has improved. The IRO Manager is part of the Permanence Taskforce, enabling their views to be incorporated in the progress of permanence plans for our children directly with service leads who chair tracking meetings for children in need and child protection. In addition to dispute resolutions, this is an early opportunity to highlight where any drift or delay has been identified.

During 2019/20, there was a significant fall in the number of practice alerts being raised by IROs, demonstrating improved practice - 29 informal practice alerts and 43 formal alerts were raised compared to 102 informal disputes and 207 formal disputes in the previous year. This year, we have introduced positive practice alerts and it is pleasing to see this number increasing.

The IRO service has continued to strive to deliver a quality service to our children in care and, despite having caseloads of around 70 children, the service has been stable in the last year. A high percentage (96%) of children participate before and during their care planning review meetings and IROs are using a strength based conversational approach with children to build confidence in attending and chairing their reviews. Children in Care reviews are also timely, and performance improved again, increasing to 96% being held in timescale with current performance at 97%.

Strong performance has been maintained with visits to looked after children occurring within 3 months (97%) although 6-weekly looked after children visits requires further improvement (84% as at November 2020). IROs have increased the monitoring and tracking of activities between reviews but this could be better.

The number of children placed in residential care decreased slightly to 9% (34 children) at end of year 2019/20. However there has been an increase in children placed in residential care - 46 children (12%) as at end of November. Of the 46 children, 31 are in children's homes compared to 26 at year end 2019/20 and 1 child is in a residential school. The increase is also due to more children placed in Mother and Baby Units – up to 8 at end of November compared to 1 at the end of March 2019/20. This increase demonstrates the impact of our new pre-birth team based in the Assessment and Intervention service.

Our monthly Looked After Children Panel has single oversight of children placed in residential settings. The panel also has the function of monitoring spend with regards to high-cost placements. A monthly report on children entering care with an associated case profile continues to be produced.

Significantly improved Public Law Outline (PLO) arrangements and practice.

We have significantly improved the timeliness and effectiveness of our PLO arrangements, an Ofsted recommendation. The changes to our pre-proceedings process have been fully embedded in practice and the PLO action plan has been implemented. There is robust oversight of PLO work through regular monitoring by the Court Progression Manager, 'Legal SMT' and the Permanence Taskforce.

The impact of improved permanence and PLO arrangements is demonstrated with a lower number of children and families in pre-proceedings with improved timeliness. As at end of November 2020, 6 children were in pre-proceedings compared to 13 children (7 families) at the end of 2019/20 and 49 children (19 families) at the end of 2018/19. All children in pre-proceedings are on child protection plans or looked after children status (section 20). Timeliness is excellent with no cases going over 16 weeks.

Audits are demonstrating improved practice with better quality referrals to Threshold of Care Legal Planning Meetings (TCLPM) resulting in more robust evidence-gathering to enable the right decisions to be made. A recent themed

audit on legal planning meetings that did not end in legal action confirmed that decision making about when to start pre-proceedings was appropriate and sound. The TCLPM process is now more streamlined with much improved co-ordination with the child protection conference. Further improvement is required in the quality of chronologies and detailed family histories.

The number of children in care proceedings is lower - 70 children (44 families) compared to 91 children (48 families) at year end 2019/20. Although Family Courts have continued with court hearings during the pandemic, complex cases have been delayed impacting on the timeliness of care proceedings earlier on in the year. This is now slowly reducing with 23 families (44 children) going over 26 weeks, but still makes up over 50% of our care proceedings over 26 weeks.

Improved planning for children placed with parents.

The improvement plan regarding children placed with parents, an Ofsted recommendation, has been implemented. Planning for children placed with parents has been strengthened and practice has improved. The placement with parent's assessment form has been redesigned and launched.

Through the Permanent Taskforce and Looked after Children Panel, increased oversight ensures that children do not drift home in their later adolescence without careful planning and support. An audit on the quality of placed with parent arrangements reported that children were monitored well, and planning had improved. We are reporting an increase in revocations – 14 since 2019. The latest data shows there are 12 children placed with parents compared to 17 at the end of year 2019/20.

Priority focus on UASC and continued provision of a timely and effective service.

All UASC enter the Corporate Parenting service to ensure expertise is utilised and we continue to provide a timely and effective service placing them in independent accommodation or foster care according to their assessed needs. We have increased the number of UASC placed in foster care placements, which is a positive outcome for those vulnerable young people. The number and proportion of UASC placed in semi-independent accommodation is lower at 47 (12%) compared to 62 (15%) at end of 2019/20. Although this is still high compared to London and national, we are pleased with our progress.

Work is underway to further upskill social workers around age assessments. We plan to set up a support group for male UASCs run by our Albanian Team Manager to focus on relationships with women based on feedback from UASC who struggle with these issues when newly arrived in the country. It has been on hold due to COVID-19 as virtual groups will not be as effective.

In 2019/20, a face-to-face consultation was undertaken with UASC focusing on education, health, and housing. Results have been presented to Members Corporate Parenting Group (MCPG) and shared with the Technical Skills Academy to improve the ESOL offer and support.

Strong Virtual School achieving good outcomes.

Our Virtual School is strong and demonstrating good outcomes in attainment, attendance, compliance, and quality of PEPs. Overall absence from school and fixed-term exclusions for children in care remains below the national children in care averages. Most of our children in care are in good or outstanding schools.

In 2019, children in care attainment at KS1 was above the national average for all subjects apart from Reading. KS2 results are strong with our children in care outperforming their national looked after peers - 60% achieved the expected standard in Reading, Writing and Maths compared to 37% nationally - placing us second in the country. Our looked after children results were only 6% behind their non-looked after borough peers, an exceptional achievement.

Performance remains above the national average at Key Stage 4, which is a pleasing result considering that over 40% had an Education, Health and Care Plan. Performance is in the top quartile for KS4 Average Attainment 8 Score and KS4 Average Progress 8 score, also above national average.

88% of school aged children in care have an up-to-date Personal Education Plan (PEP) and the quality of PEPs is improving.

Due to COVID-19, there is no data at KS1 or KS2 for this academic year. At KS4 unvalidated data based on teacher assessment reports that 35% of our children in care achieved 5 or more GCSEs at grade 4 or above.

The number of looked after children excluded from school significantly reduced in the academic year of 2019/20 possibly partially because of the national lockdown due to COVID-19. This year, 16 young people had at least one fixed

term exclusion compared to 20 last year. There have been no permanent exclusions during this academic year. Our exploitation work has also been targeting exclusions with an aim to reducing them.

Following the Ofsted inspection an external Peer Review of our Virtual School with a focus on young care leavers was undertaken. This reported that the virtual school has broadened the offer and motivated and inspired young people aged 16-18 years and care leavers. This includes activities to prepare for University, mentoring opportunities, and adventure weeks in different countries, apprenticeship network, university taster days, residential learning experiences and UCAS support meetings. The review reported that the virtual school team place significant focus on the social and emotional well-being of children.

Strengthened strategic oversight and leadership to improve health outcomes for children in care and care leavers, but still much to do.

Improving health outcomes remains a top priority, and an Ofsted recommendation. Whilst there have been improvements both strategically and operationally there is still much to do.

At the end of 2019/20, 87% of children in care for one year or more had up to date health assessments compared to 92% in 2018/19. Performance was impacted by a high proportion of RHAs due in March 2020 not being completed in time because of COVID-19. 87% remains in line with all other comparators.

The impact of COVID-19 on health checks continues with 81% of children in care for one year or more having up to date health checks. Health performance is being impacted negatively because of poor dental check performance due to COVID-19. 47% of looked after children have up to date dental checks as at end of November compared to 74% at the end of 2019/20. This has been escalated to the LAC health sub-group and the Designated Nurse for Safeguarding and LAC Chair has written to the NHSE safeguarding lead for a response. Through this avenue, we also ensured a dental surgery provided an interpreter for a looked after child so that urgent dental treatment could be provided.

The timeliness of initial health assessments (IHA) remains a high priority for the DCS and senior leaders in the Council, CCG and NELFT. In 2019/20, we co-located the NELFT LAC Team with our social care team and a new IHA and RHA dashboard tracks timeliness and performance. We also set up a multi-agency LAC Health

sub-group chaired by the Designated Nurse for Safeguarding and LAC tasked to improve health arrangements for children in care and Care Leavers. This group reports to the Members Corporate Parenting Group. The CCG has also uplifted investment into the NELFT LAC team to ensure administration capacity can ensure a timely response to IHA/RHA assessments.

The timeliness of initial health assessments improved to 26% at the end of 2019/20, and whilst the improvement is not good enough, we are pleased to report that the impact of actions taken are bearing fruit with IHA timeliness significantly improving to 64% (end of October 2020).

As part of health assessments, emotional issues are identified, and emotional wellbeing is monitored as part of the annual health check process. A good proportion of children in care return a Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), and the results of those SDQ scores show good performance. SDQ scores reduced from 12.8 to 12.5 and remain slightly below comparators.

Work has been completed to set up SDQ scoring on Liquid Logic for all children in care aged four or over – currently 80% have an SDQ recorded in the last 12 months. This means that changes in emotional health over time will also be more clearly tracked and appropriate provisions to support emotional wellbeing will be identified as part of the health assessment process.

The CAMHS Hot Clinic designed to ensure children in care receive the appropriate help was paused during early COVID but is now functional across children's social care and education. All referrals are reviewed, and referrer feedback given. SDQs and CAMHS is a rolling item on the LAC Health Subgroup and operational issues are picked up at LAC Zoning meetings held monthly.

The Principal Social Worker chairs the transitions meeting for children in care. The CCG and provider(s) are represented at this meeting with relationships improving as a result. Education is also now represented. Several children have been moved on due to this partnership approach.

A dedicated CAMHS looked after children specialist works directly with a small number of children to ensure their needs are addressed within local CAMHS services, liaising with services out of borough when necessary. This worker also offers support to foster carers and is developing alternative ways to engage children and young people with support for their emotional wellbeing.

The DCS is Chair of the 3-borough child health transformation meeting providing greater opportunity for local oversight of CAMHS transformation work.

Keeping young people safe.

Levels of offending amongst our looked after children are low: 2% as at the end of March 2020 compared to an England average of 3%. Significant focus by the Council and its partners on the needs of children who are at risk of sexual and criminal exploitation, including risk of radicalisation, with our Corporate Parenting Head of Service being a member of MASE and CEG ensures robust oversight of children in care and care leavers at risk of exploitation.

Similarly, the Head of Corporate Parenting attending the newly formed Resettlement Panel will ensure our children in care leaving custody have their unique needs considered and plans made in advance of release.

Stronger, ambitious Corporate Parenting working well with our Lead Member as Chair.

We have strengthened our Member Corporate Parenting Group (MCPG) in the last two years. Chaired by the Lead Member for Social Care and Health Integration and including three other elected Members who individually champion education, health, and placement quality. The MCPG also includes representation from Community Solutions including Housing, Homes and Money, Health, Commissioning and Education.

The Board is well attended, offers challenge, and holds all members to account. The Board has played a key role in delivering our Enhanced Local Offer.

Looked after children and care leavers present at each Board and once a year have a take-over where they chair the Board and set our priorities for the year ahead. The Promises made to our looked after children and care leavers were refreshed two years ago and remain the focus of the MCPG to shape the Council being the best parent we can be to those we are responsible for.

Our Lead Member is clear that we must have the highest aspirations for our children and led a recent overhaul of Corporate Parenting which is much improved and provides vigorous challenge to both the Council and our partners.

The DfE Care Leavers visit (see care leavers section) confirmed our strengthened leadership in this area and the significant progress we have made in our approach to Corporate Parenting. A recommendation is to extend the membership of this Board to include DWP and Probation.

Our plans for the next 12 months to maintain and improve practice

- Embed the new Corporate Parenting and Permanence Service, further strengthening Corporate Parenting, permanence, and outcomes for children in care and Care Leavers.
- Refresh the Corporate Parenting Strategy by the end of the year.
- Consult with a larger cohort of children in care and care leavers, including those placed further away. This is a top priority for 2020-21.
- Strengthening participation in Reviews.
- Implement Virtual School Peer Review opportunities and continue to ensure education outcomes improve for children in care.
- Maintain or further improve performance on placement stability.
- Ongoing focus on edge of care work and rehabilitation home to ensure the right children are in care.
- A focus on unregulated 16+ placements; maintain fostering post 16 when placements can become fragile and increase foster care options for UASC.
- Our new fostering recruitment campaign is planned to recruit more foster carers who are willing to consider adolescents and UASC placements.
- Improve and sustain performance on health assessments. The foundations of improvement have already been laid.
- Continue to improve the offer to support children and young people's emotional wellbeing.
- Integrate the use of SDQs more holistically into the health assessments so emotional wellbeing is considered.
- Listen to our Black and Asian children to understand their experiences of care in the context of our ambition to drive forward Black Lives Matter.
- Undertake data analysis to help identify any inequalities including access to services and gaps in provision, including children in care and Care Leavers.

9. Care Leavers

What we know about the quality and impact of social work practice

We currently have 282 care leavers aged 18 to 25 in Barking and Dagenham of which 98 are former unaccompanied asylum seekers (UASC). This compares to 245 at the end of 2019/20 and 82 former UASCs (increase of 15% - 37 cases).

Around two thirds of care leavers are male; 92% are aged 18-21 and 8% are aged 22 to 25. This compares to 96% and 4% respectively in 2019/20. Nearly a third of care leavers are White British and 26% are from Black ethnic backgrounds. 13% are White Other, 12% are Asian and 7% are mixed. Currently, 44% (123) of our care leavers live in Barking and Dagenham. 54% live outside the borough but are living in the surrounding boroughs of Redbridge and Havering.

As a result of lockdown restrictions, the number of UASC aged under-18 has decreased to 36 (0.06%) at end of November, compared to 39 (0.06%) at the end of 2019/20. Current numbers are 16 off the threshold of 0.08%. Our UASC are mostly male (86%) with 80% aged 16-17. Afghan is the most common nationality at 28% (10), followed by Eritrean at 17% (6) and then Albanian and Vietnamese both at 14% (5). We continue to be on the Pan-London UASC rota and recently took six young people from Kent.

A new Corporate Parenting Service with increased capacity in the leaving care teams.

The new Corporate Parenting and Permanence service went live as planned in April 2020 and is beginning to demonstrate positive impact for care leavers. This includes a strengthened Corporate Parenting operating structure and model to meet the needs of care leavers.

The service now has more Leaving Care Advisors in acknowledgement of the extended duties and to ensure that there is adequate support for young people transitioning to adulthood. The service has the flexibility to transfer young people to a Leaving Care Advisor when the time is right for that young person,

rather than being dictated by their age, and will deliver a more seamless and improved service to our care leavers.

Our values and ambition that “we are corporate parents to all children in care and care leavers up to the age of 25” with no expiry date is being strengthened and compliments from young people and IROs are increasing as a result. The two leaving care teams are stable and comprise of all permanent staff. Caseloads are manageable at an average of 20 but are increasing due to the overall rise in the number of care leavers.

Strong relationships have been formed between care leavers and their social workers and personal advisers and good quality support is provided. Ensuring stability for care leavers during COVID-19 and lockdown periods has, and continues to be, a priority. Care leavers keep in touch figures are high at 96% and over 90% of care leavers say they can contact their worker.

Care leavers are visited regularly, and those visits have been face-to-face where appropriate and virtual this year. Anecdotal evidence is that virtual visits between care leavers and leaving care advisers has been positive, enabling increased communication and a timely resolution of any issues or problems. The quality of visit records is variable but with the permanent leaving care teams established, a new service manager and a new cohort of eight leaving care advisers joining in early 2020, improving practice and outcomes for care leavers is a top priority.

Safeguarding for care leavers is managed well. The consultant social workers provide oversight and support to leaving care advisers when safeguarding issues arise. Care leavers 18 plus are monitored at MASE and CEG when exploitation risks are apparent. We also keep 18+ leavers with social workers if there are still high vulnerabilities.

Compliance and the quality of pathway plans is improving; on average 87% of care leavers have an up-to-date pathway plan and audits have shown stronger evidence of care leaver’s contribution and voice. However, the quality remains variable. Our pathway plan is too long and is not young person friendly. Work is underway to review the Pathway Plan with care leavers.

Ambitious, aspirational, and passionate Council investment to Care Leavers and an improved enhanced Local Offer.

Our enhanced Local Offer; an improved housing offer for care leavers through the Vulnerable Housing Panel; partnership working with Housing colleagues; and the multiagency EET Panel are continuing to positively impact on improving care leavers outcomes to above national, London and statistical neighbours.

Our Vulnerable Housing Panel improves housing options for care leavers with dedicated staff to support young people paying their rent and preventing evictions. Joint work with housing colleagues is taking place to increase options for care leavers and signing up young people to tenancy arrangements and tenancy sustainment. Care leavers are also included in the Council’s Inclusive Growth and Vulnerable Housing strategy. Suitable accommodation, therefore, has improved further this year despite the pressure of COVID-19 and the supply challenges we face in the borough. At the end of November 91% of care leavers are living in suitable accommodation, up by 7% on 2019/20.

Staying Put continues to be discussed at all Transitional Care Planning Meetings for young people aged 17-plus, in addition to their pathway planning and child in care reviews. The number of care leavers in ‘Staying Put’ arrangements is 16 as at end of November 2020.

Care leavers continue to be supported in a range of semi-independent provision secured through commissioned framework, and includes shared houses rented from the private sector with bespoke support packages if required. This framework ensures an appropriate service that delivers excellent outcomes for young people and ensures consistency in the quality of accommodation.

The restructure of Adults and Children’s Commissioning has been completed and a new Brokerage service is now in place. This has created additional resources to quality assure providers in both Adult’s and Children’s Care and Support. The sourcing of placements now sits in the Brokerage service to ensure we are better at finding the right placements for children and young people.

From the beginning of May, to facilitate the Department for Education’s scheme to provide digital devices to vulnerable young people, we identified those care leavers who required laptops, and facilitated these being delivered and supported with set up.

An increasing proportion of care leavers are in education, training, or employment. The multi-agency EET Panel, comprising representatives from the

Virtual School, Job Shop, Apprenticeships and Careers Advisors, is having a positive impact. 65% of care leavers are in education, employment, and training – up by 2% on 2019/20 outturn and 12% higher compared to 2018/19 above national, London and statistical neighbours. We have also appointed an Internship Co-ordinator to identify further opportunities across the Council. Our Virtual School supports care leavers and in this academic year we have 23 care leavers who are at University and two care leavers graduated.

The DfE has introduced a ‘care leaver covenant’ that will enable organisations to make commitments to care leavers within the spirit of the corporate parenting principles: we will be subscribing. We believe that with our Council ethos of ‘no one left behind’, our strong partnerships and inclusive growth ambitions, we are well placed to become a truly ‘universal family’ to our care leavers.

‘New Town Culture’ is an ongoing collaboration between arts and social care agencies, funded between 2018 and 2020 by a London Borough of Culture award from the Mayor of London. A variety of activities were run during 2019/20 which included 18 UASC and 33 Care Leavers which centred around feelings of identity and included making a film. Further projects are underway extending the brief to children in our care and young people leaving our care.

We also have a new MA course in conjunction with Goldsmiths University on Creative Social Work and a new InterVision reflective space, which will be used to help develop the 13 Leaving Care Advisers from Spring 2021. This is part of a drive to develop LCA’s as a service and ultimately should help improve their practice with care leavers, in line with the recent focused visit recommendations.

We were very proud when two of our care leavers obtained an apprenticeship position in Children Care and Support this year, and one of them has recently been successful in obtaining a permanent position in the Business Improvement team in the service.

More to be done on improving health arrangements and outcomes for care leavers.

We recognise that health arrangements for care leavers still require improvement. The multi-agency looked after children and care leavers Health sub-group reporting into the Corporate Parenting Group has been tasked to drive forward improvements in this area.

All care leavers are now encouraged to download the NHS App, by the provider specialist nurses, which has many functions and is regularly updated. The hardcopy version of the health passport is no longer used. An audit will be undertaken in January 2021 to assess variation and compliance of the NHS App, led by the provider and Local Authority. In 2021 further work will also be undertaken on developing a specific health offer for care leavers over 18.

Care leavers mental health is a priority, particularly during COVID-19 where isolation is increased. A good proportion return a Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), and these are now tracked via improved reporting functions so we can ensure a holistic approach to our care leavers health needs. A CAMHS Hot clinic has supported improved mental health offer. In addition, the CAMHS Transitions Group has been set up to look at pathways for young people transitioning from children to adults’ mental health provisions. All care leavers can access free annual membership to Barking and Dagenham leisure centres with opportunities to take a friend and have free membership for the Youth Zone.

Care Leavers are involved in their services and their achievements are celebrated.

We formally consult with our care leavers through an Annual Survey, and response rates continue to rise. We recognise the volume of those participating needs to increase and are exploring young-people friendly digital options. A larger, active, and visible Children in Care Council ‘Skittlz’ continues to help shape practice and influence decision-making. Feedback is incorporated into our practice framework and standards. Representatives of Skittlz attend each Members’ Corporate Parenting Group meetings to share their views on various topics that are agenda items or are issues that have been initiated by young people e.g., Black Lives Matter and Family Contact.

We celebrate our children’s achievements at an annual awards ceremony. This year, due to COVID-19, workers visited young people to deliver trophies, certificates and taking pictures which will be collated to mark the occasion.

The Principal Social Worker facilitates a child practitioner forum, CSW forum and other settings where the reframing of corporate parenting, use of language and experiences of children in our care and leaving our care are discussed and

built upon. One such innovation was to bring Lifelong Links into the borough for young people leaving our care to reconnect with their primary attachments. This service now sits within the Specialist Intervention Service in Care and Support.

We ensure that the Local Offer to Care Leavers is available to all eligible young people in various formats. A new text messaging service to keep young people updated on events, jobs and opportunities is now live.

In 2019/20, we trained 37 professionals and carers in “My Care, Who Cares” led by care leavers. This training helps to foster a deeper understanding of what it is like to be a child in care. During 2020/21, this training has been put on hold due to COVID-19, but plans are in place to run virtually later in the year.

Care Leavers have been involved in quality assurance processes for 16+ provision Framework by attending units with managers undertaking the QA and contributing their views to the gradings.

Positive two-day formal visit by National Implementation Adviser for Care Leavers.

We are very pleased with the positive feedback from our two-day DfE improvement visit, undertaken in November 2020 by Mark Riddell, the National Implementation Adviser for Care Leavers. In summary this visit endorsed our rapid improvement and progress to have a better offer for care leavers across the whole service area. Mark Riddell states that he was *“very impressed by the leadership and management approach that was ambitious, aspirational and I got a real sense of passion and commitment to have a better offer for care leavers across the whole service area”*. The visit and feedback confirmed the strengthened leadership in this area and the significant progress we have made in our approach to Corporate Parenting, our local offer and the extended duties that apply to care leavers up to 25 years. Our Corporate Parenting Board has been strengthened and a recommendation is to extend the membership of this Board to DWP and Probation.

The visit confirmed that our leaving care model is operationally good but that the model could be stronger with specialist workers based in the leaving care team such as a dedicated housing officer resource in the team, an emotional wellbeing/mental health practitioner and an EET officer. Caseloads were at an

acceptable level, although our Leaving Care Personal Advisors covered many areas, tasks and processes that sometimes made them feel out of their depth.

Our Housing Offer was considered as very positive especially given the challenges with supply and demand in the borough. Our leisure offer and Council Tax Exemption for care leavers were also viewed as very good. We have care leaver apprenticeships already in our local offer, but a recommendation was made for us to set a ringfenced amount as a target (possibly 10).

A key recommendation was to review and strengthen our ‘whole council’ offer by organising an event with each partner agency so that they can set out their local offer and *“for the test to be applied ‘is this good enough for my child’ and with a particular focus on: A health offer to care leavers from 18yrs to 25yrs; and a Probation offer to care leavers entering and leaving custody up to 25yrs”*. Several other recommendations have been made and these will be incorporated into our improvement plan enabling us to reach our ambition of being ‘the best corporate parents’ we can be.

Our plans for the next 12 months to maintain and improve practice

- Elected Members to continue to hold all partners to account and champion the needs of our care leavers, unlocking the full potential that the council, voluntary services, and businesses offer to improve the lives of our carer leavers. This includes signing up to the Care leaves Covenant and the whole Council celebrating National Care Leavers week.
- Continue improvements for Care Leavers in Employment, Education and Training, with a focus on older care leavers using cross-Council support and opportunities in challenging COVID-19 times.
- Develop a preparation for apprenticeship scheme where care leavers can experience extended work experience placements.
- Continue to develop the housing offer to care leavers and the support they need to manage independent living.
- Extend the use of mentors/independent visitors for care leavers who have no or limited contact with family.
- Review the Pathway Plan with care leavers to make it more meaningful to young people.

- Improve health arrangements for care leavers. Significant attention to be given to care leavers health and wellbeing particularly during COVID-19 – work with health and CAMHS/AMH colleagues is crucial.
- Pause programme offered for care leavers who have lost a child to the care system and improved joint working needed between PA's and Pre-birth team.
- Deliver Lasting Links working with care leavers supporting them in securing lifelong positive links to support their transitions beyond 25.
- Listen to our Black and Asian care leavers to understand their experiences of care in the context of our ambition to drive forward Black Lives Matter.
- Implement recommendations from DfE Care Leavers Improvement Visit.

10. Voices and Lived Experience

Listening to our children and young people.

We are making good progress in strengthening children's voices and direct work in social work practice. Further strengthening, consistency and visible child voice and experience in all we do, continues to be priority, and at the heart of our ambitions for our new Independent Scrutineer role for the safeguarding board.

'Skittlz' - our Children in Care Council - continues to help shape practice and influence decision-making through our Member Corporate Parenting Group (MCPG) guided by the Council's *'Children in Care and Care Leaver Promises'*. Skittlz have told us that they want their social worker/Personal Adviser to be kind, smart, helpful, friendly, very calm, and supportive. This feedback has been incorporated into our practice framework and standards. Care leavers played a key role in the appointment of the current Operations Director and take part in quality assurance visits to provider settings with commissioners.

We formally consult with our children in care and care leavers through an Annual Survey. Although response rates continue to rise, our priority is always to engage and consult with a larger number of children in care and care leavers. We are exploring young-people friendly digital options to achieve this.

Survey findings in 2020 were largely positive and an improving picture with 90% of children in care aged 8-17 feeling listened to; 92% telling us that they can contact their social worker and 89% said they know how to make a complaint. One of the most significant improvements is a reduction in the number of social workers children (aged 8-17) had – only 8% had four or more social workers compared to 26% last year. Frequent changes of social worker are one of the most significant issues that children in care raise.

During the first lockdown the Principal Social Worker looked at 80 children across social care services to verify that some form of direct work was being completed during virtual visits. Findings were positive and of significance was the surprising adaptability and flexibility of our staff to use new virtual tools in working with children and families. There were some clear examples of direct work being undertaken virtually, but it was not consistent.

In October we consulted with children in care and care leavers about Black Lives Matter (BLM) to understand their experiences and views. Young people shared personal experiences of being a young black person within the care system, noting positive experiences alongside areas for improvement. Their feedback was shared at the November Members Corporate Parenting Group meeting. Further work will be undertaken with regards to ensuring all foster carers know how to meet the needs of children who are cross-culturally and racially placed, as this issue was raised by some young people as an area for further development.

To continue our commitment to listening to young people we hosted two consultations in November this year. Care leavers were also invited to speak to Mark Riddell, the DfE National Implementation Advisor for Care Leavers during the virtual visit. Overall, feedback was positive and personal advisers were viewed as generally good. Care leavers expressed the need for more support as they get older and recommendations are being taken forward.

A consultation was held asking young people in care and care leavers for their views in relation to the council's plans for accommodation for young people. The group were able to share their views about what home should feel like, what they would need to feel safe, the style of the accommodation and what facilities should be available for them. The young people enjoyed the opportunity to participate and look forward to meeting with the architects in the future.

We have piloted a process for capturing children's voices via video in Child Protection Conferences to strengthen participation and to hear the child's lived experience. This worked well, with children finding it easier to record their wishes and feelings and practitioners being able to capture the voice and lived experience of the child.

Young people delivering and shaping services.

Our BAD Youth Forum continues to be very active, with 65 members from 10 out of 13 secondary schools electing representatives. The Forum comprises of two social action sub-groups and a Young Inspectors group, all of which are well established with a comprehensive annual report presented to Council Assembly. All sessions continued virtually following national lockdown.

Youth Forum members were involved in the work of the Domestic Abuse Commission. Members were trained in Domestic Abuse awareness and how to stay safe in a relationship, which they shared with their peers. Working alongside Refuge, Forum members designed posters to raise awareness around domestic abuse during the COVID lockdown, which were professionally designed and distributed by the Council and schools. The Young Mayor and her social action group raised £966 for Refuge by undertaking a variety of fundraising challenges.

Working alongside the Youth Forums of Havering and Redbridge, our Youth Forum members worked with BHRUT to devise a lockdown comprehensive survey of young people to establish how they were being affected by the closure of schools. 1,239 responses were collated across the three boroughs, 365 being from Barking and Dagenham young people. Survey responses have helped shape the priority for services in supporting young people's recovery from lockdown, with Forum members trained around the use and advocacy of Kooth, an online counselling service. A second survey is currently underway.

Forum members have been involved in Black Lives Matter work, as well as a wide range of one-off consultations throughout the year. A consultation around the proposals to cut young people's free travel resulted in quotes for Barking and Dagenham young people being used in a lobbying report from Travelwatch to TfL. Proposals to cut free travel were subsequently scrapped. The Forum Chair sits on the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Forum members sit on the London Youth Assembly.

The borough's Youth Independent Advisory Group continues to meet quarterly with the Police to discuss key issues. VotesforSchools is accessible to nearly all our schools and continues to be used by around 40% of schools weekly, providing access to resources that encourage debate and a weekly ballot, which typically has over 4000 responses.

We are also undertaking project to increase child participation in service design using a web-based platform. The discovery phase is underway. The final product will be a digital platform which children can utilise to feedback their views on service delivery and redesign as well as feedback on the services they receive in social care. This will help increase the ability of the children we work with to use their voices and lived experience to help shape our services.

In consultation with children and young people we terminated our contract for independent visiting, to bring the service back in house as an employee and community volunteer programme to strengthen our corporate parenting oversight and approach. 17 Independent Visitors were recruited up to October 2020 (the majority of which are Council employees).

Listening to and developing our staff.

The Director of Operations and leadership prioritise listening and collaborating with all staff on social work practice. Unions have commended our level of staff participation through our design and implementation of the children's improvement programme and new Target Operating Model.

The senior leadership team regularly briefs all staff ensuring strong communication links. This relationship characterised by mutual respect is replicated between individual Heads of Service and their service areas. We have developed a culture where staff feel valued and where positive affirmation and feedback is vital.

Successes and good practice are celebrated across Care and Support. Managers readily compliment staff for good work and the Director in turn always writes to those members of staff acknowledging their positive contributions. A quarterly 'Feel Good factor' presentation is delivered at the All-Service sessions sharing all the good feedback received from parents, children, carers, judges, schools, children and IROs.

Over the last year, the Child Practitioner Council (CPC) has diversified into taking greater ownership of its role to be the feedback link between frontline social work practice and Children's Care and Support leadership. The Chair is taking greater responsibility for bringing in speakers and members are bringing their own practice strengths and issues for discussion. The Operations Director attends the monthly meeting and has forged a closer link with the group and uses them as a temperature check on what is working well and what needs to improve. One of the significant achievements of the CPC for 2020 was a new joint clinic for Education and Children's Care and Support to address vulnerabilities.

The CPC has also become instrumental in quality assuring and consulting on new ways of working and plans for our new secure base for social care as part of recovery post COVID-19.

A Consultant Social worker (CSW) forum has also been reinvigorated with an intake of new CSWs with a key priority to develop and share best practice across the service. Through helping them to develop their knowledge and skills set, many of these CSW's have also been able to progress to manager roles.

The Principal Social Worker continues to provide coaching and mentoring for practitioners and managers as identified in their personal learning and development plans. This is highly valued and on an individual level has been successful in enabling social workers to progress in their career.

The Principal Social Worker regularly meets with workers to gain feedback about practice, their progress and to gain an overall emotional temperature check across departments. Feedback is provided to senior management which in turn influences our improvement work and recruitment and retention strategy.

In the last year, the Principal Social Worker has been working closely with the third sector (BD Collective) to ensure the ethos for social work practice within the borough is one of collaboration, relationally based and where voluntary colleagues remain involved with families as they progress within statutory systems. This now forms a new part of our social work induction with new starters learning and interacting with voluntary colleagues in the borough. The aim of this work is to help ensure a seamless journey for the child and family through social work interventions and that community links are maintained

when social workers pull out. This will lead us into a more community-based model of social work practice.

We have a Teaching Partnership (NELTP) with local Universities to provide workers with opportunities to teach in London Met and UEL, sharing expertise and aiding their overall career progression and retention. Workers have been able to share knowledge and invest in the next generation of social workers, via admissions interviews and skills workshops. The work we do with our students and ASYE's has also helped us to identify areas of improvement, helping us retain our new staff beyond their first year of employment.

Our new career progression framework, including YOS practitioners, has been published along with professional personal development plans. Additional future work will be around developing a career progression framework and training plan for Family Support Workers, Leaving Care Advisers, Family Group Conference and Family Time Contact staff. The Principal Social Worker assists managers and staff in coaching work to progress through the framework into promotions and sideways movement, secondments, and shadowing opportunities. This has helped retain staff who otherwise would have left the borough.

Our schedule of training is closely linked to our Practice Model - a relational approach to working with children and families. Our social workers can draw on a variety of inter-related approaches and tools for example restorative practice and strengthening families. Our common values are warmth; empathy; authenticity; helpfulness and kindness. After training in Strengthening Families our workers are now starting to change the language, they use in line with what our children recommend. They are also talking more about relational practice and how this looks. This is the start of cultural change becoming embedded as part of the Practice Framework Model.

We have continued to provide an excellent offer for training, successfully transferring 80% of all training online during the pandemic. Work is underway to strengthen the links between the quarterly audit schedule, audit findings and the training plan so that impact on practice can be better measured. This will also eventually link in with regular seminars focused on practice development undertaken jointly by the Principal Social Worker and Quality Assurance managers.

New training for 2021 includes a focus on professional curiosity in the MASH; digital harm under the Contextual Safeguarding agenda and the third and final roll-out of the Practice Framework Model of Restorative Practice. The use of professional curiosity has been an audit recommendation and training will help practitioners become less fixed in the decisions and the approach they take, being able to reframe what they experience and consider new and creative ways of approaching social work contexts.

The Principal Social Worker continues to lead on the Improved Journey of the Child (IJOC) monthly frontline management development forum. The focus so far has been on supervision and management oversight, case summaries, practice alerts, chronologies, and planning, all of which link to audit outcomes. There has been progress with a new case summary and supervision format, reducing management time needed while focusing on quality. We will continue to embed this work until we see sustainable change in how managers exercise their oversight and build on what we have collectively learned so far.

Practice Observations focusing on supervision and improved performance have also reassured senior leadership that an overall good quality of supervision is being maintained. The next focus will be on MASH and whether scrutiny around risk analysis, progression, professional curiosity, and process have been sustained.

New Town Culture is having a positive impact.

Overall, the New Town Culture programme of projects is having a positive impact aimed at bringing increased creativity into social work practice; increasing the expression and ability to hear actual children's voices and lastly for 2021 and beyond, planning to help transform the culture and ethos of social work practice and provision in the borough. Impact so far has been visible with children and young people feeding back on how their aspirations have changed because of interventions and from workers on the way new ways of thinking have helped shape and refresh their practice.

Race Equality and Black Lives Matters.

In response to BLM and in the wake of George Floyd's murder, a series of staff conversations were held during the summer of 2020. Feedback from all sessions has been compiled into a comprehensive report which has been shared with staff

groups, senior leadership and the DCS. This has aligned with all wider corporate initiatives.

Staff have explored issues such as privilege and microaggressions connected with practice in children's care and support and fed back issues affecting black staff when wanting to progress into more senior positions. This work culminated in a service wide celebration through the month of October where black cultures and people were celebrated. Our overall approach has impacted positively upon staff morale with staff feeling hopeful that ambitions to make changes are meaningful. We have secured the Workforce Race Equality Standard pilot status to further support our challenge and support in this area, which focuses on areas such as leadership, progression, and culture.

It has also allowed scrutiny in many areas of service culture, process, and individual practice. A Care and Support BLM action plan will be delivered throughout 2021/22 with some work already underway, for example, voices and experiences of our black children in care, care leavers and YOS young people and stop and search knowledge and legislation learning sessions.

11. How do we know it? quality assurance and performance management summary.

We continuously review our approach to quality assurance and performance management with a view to not only improve the quality of casework practice, but to support service development and drive improvement. Immediately following the OFSTED inspection in 2019 we refreshed our quality assurance framework with a very simple objective: getting the basics right – compliance, workforce, culture, and governance. .

The challenge ahead is how we truly embed the lived experience of children, their progress and outcomes and what difference we made into our day-to-day business and how this forms the basis of our leadership approach and questions we ask ourselves, our service users, our workforce, and partners. These "three questions (see section xxx) the framework which captures our journey so far and our ambition, will be the basis of our work over the coming 12 months.

Current Arrangements.

Our Quality Assurance Framework is linked to our Practice Standards – against which tests of assurance are performed - and reflects our new Practice Model. The framework spans the entirety of the child’s journey. This ensures that audit and quality programmes accurately measure the quality of practice and evaluates the impact upon, and the outcomes delivered for, our children and young people.

We undertake a wide range of internal auditing activity supplemented by substantial external auditing delivered in accordance with our annual audit schedule, and this informs many of the conclusions drawn in this document. It has also helped us shape our long-term improvement activity and respond rapidly to emerging issues. We have also launched a programme of practice observations to further reinforce our understanding of practice quality.

Since the inspection, our approach has been to focus on quality, impact and what we do with the learning from the audit activity. We have a comprehensive audit action plan to ensure that recommendations and learning from audits are disseminated. However, we need this to better support to quantify our progress in key priorities and practice and building more capacity in our operational staff to support further quality assurance developments.

Mentoring and coaching are available for managers completing learning audits in our aim to increase confidence and understand what ‘good’ and ‘outstanding’ looks like. We have received positive feedback from the frontline during thematic activity and there is increasing evidence of our audit activity having a positive impact. Case specific remedial steps are generally followed through in a timely way.

The current Framework sets out our areas of focus and schedules for audit and observation over a 12-month cycle. This cycle is developed based on:

- Key performance indicators and practice-focus areas, developed from what we know.
- The new regulatory framework (ILACS and JTAI)
- Findings from recently commissioned independent scrutiny (including externally commissioned reviews).

- Consultation with the colleagues across Children’s Care and Support and partners
- Horizon scanning and using innovation, complaints and learning from poor practice to challenge and drive improvement.

We believe that this approach – supplemented by our schedule of Practice Observation – will place us better to marshal impact at three key levels; case-level; management and operational oversight e.g., changes in working practice, and at a strategic level e.g. service redesign and multi-agency working. We also recognise that we now need to take the next steps.

The new Quality Assurance Framework (from April 2021)

Scrutiny of social work practice is an essential part of ensuring that the support we provide, and the interventions we make, to support our most vulnerable children and young people is of the very highest quality. The aspiration of any quality assurance framework is, and has always been, to test this very thing.

However, we recognise that to achieve good or better for our children, we need our quality assurance and practice challenge to be the best it can be and to drive the ambitions we have for children and families in the borough to have better lived experiences and outcomes. Although robust, our current quality assurance model is also traditional and at times tends to focus on compliance, process and risk and outcomes, rather than on lived experiences, and systematic evaluation of outcome and impact.

We are currently in the early stages of developing our new quality assurance framework which will require a whole-system realignment around understanding and progressing the lived experience, improving outcomes, and understanding impact of leaders, managers and workers in children’s and families lives.

This next stage will build on our work so far, but also challenge some of the ways we currently work and the tools, processes, and systems we use to improve practice. The three questions we will be working to realign around, are:

Question 1: Do we understand the children's lived experience, and how it is impacting upon them?

Question 2: Have the child's lived experience improved and outcomes improved due to our involvement?

Question 3: Can we see the impact that we have had? Is our practice approach evident?

The three questions provide a framework anchored in lived experience, outcomes and impact on children and families lives, across a framework of risk, planning, intervention, assessment, direct work, visits, review, and oversight. It is through asking these three questions that we will be able to fully understand if we are improving the lives of the children and young people of Barking and Dagenham.

This summary document outlines, in broad terms, the underpinning principles of our new framework for quality assurance, drawing together the various strands of activity that comprise quality assurance. Looking across the journey of the child, it will reach across service blocks and boundaries and describe how it will work, what we will do, and who will do it.

As will be seen, we will not lose sight of compliance and process because of our ambitions but will strive to systematise these to the extent that we are routinely identifying challenges in these areas and responding to them as what they are: matters of business as usual. The wider quality assurance system will continue to identify issues as they occur, and support in the resolution of these problems: but the focus will be on the three questions.

This will not happen overnight. Additional capacity will be required – and will be provided – to support this approach. There is much work to do to develop the system; tools; skills; and capabilities required to operate in this way. Our ability to take what we are learning and make meaningful, impactful changes will need to develop: and establishing the Centre of Practice will be a key part of developing this capability.

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We also recognise that in asking those questions, much work will need to be done to answer them in some areas of work and practice. However, we are embarking on this journey as part of our commitment to continually raise the bar and improve outcomes for children and families.

We also know, the more we ask those questions and leaders, managers, and partners, it will impact on the way we work, support and challenge in the next phase of our improvement journey. Our plan is that this approach extends to multi agency working, SEND and adults services, with plans and programmes in hand to achieve this ambition.