

ASSEMBLY

17 May 2023

Title: Children's Care and Support Self-Evaluation and OFSTED Inspection Readiness	
Report of the Cabinet Member for Children's Social Care and Disabilities	
Open Report	For Information
Wards Affected: All	Key Decision: No
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Summary	
<p>Children's Care and Support (Children's Social Care) was last the subject of a full OFSTED Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) inspection in February and March of 2019. The resultant OFSTED judgement from that inspection was one of 'Requires Improvement', which followed the previous inspection in 2014 that determined the same judgement.</p> <p>OFSTED uses classifications for its judgements. 'Inadequate'; 'Requires Improvement'; 'Good' and 'Outstanding'. Since 2019 work to deliver improvements in the service have been continuous, and progress throughout has been the subject of various briefings to elected Members, including updates provided to Overview and Scrutiny Committee (OSC).</p> <p>The purpose of this report is to provide a contemporaneous update to the Assembly regarding the current position of Children's Care and Support regarding its readiness for the next ILACS inspection which is currently expected to take place during 2023. Section 4 of the report sets out details of the key improvements that have been made since 2019 and the priorities for 2023.</p>	
Recommendation(s)	
The Assembly is recommended to:	
(i) Note the preparations for the expected OFSTED Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services inspection, as detailed in the report; and	
(ii) Note the Children's Care and Support OFSTED Self-Evaluation 2022 at Appendix A to the report.	

Reason(s)

To advise the Assembly, in light of Members' role as 'corporate parents', on progress within the Children's Care and Support services and preparations for the next OFSTED inspection into the services.

1. Introduction and Background

- 1.1 Children's Care and Support (Children's Social Care) was last the subject of a full OFSTED Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) inspection in February and March of 2019. The resultant OFSTED judgement from this inspection was one of 'Requires Improvement', this followed the previous inspection in 2014 that determined the same judgement.
- 1.2 The OFSTED Inspection Framework uses a 'proportionate and risk-based' inspection schedule that varies according to the most recent performance rating of the local authority. The components of this approach are:
 - Judgement inspections, which can be standard or short, and generally occur every three years;
 - Focused visits, which occur in the period between inspections (a visit may be replaced by a joint targeted area inspection [JTAI]);
 - Annual self-evaluation submissions, to be discussed at annual engagement meetings between OFSTED and the Local Authority;
 - Data from the OFSTED intelligence system (based on Annual Statistical Returns).
- 1.3 OFSTED uses classifications for its judgements. 'Inadequate'; 'Requires Improvement'; 'Good' and 'Outstanding'. Since 2019 work to deliver improvements in the service have been continuous, and progress throughout has been the subject of various briefings to elected Members, including updates provided to Overview and Scrutiny Committee (OSC).
- 1.4 The purpose of this report is to provide a contemporaneous update to OSC regarding the current position of Children's Care and Support regarding its readiness for the next ILACS inspection which is currently expected to take place at some point during 2023.

2. The Inspection Schedule

Inspection Outline

- 2.1 Five days' notice of inspections/visits will be given (compared with one day's notice currently) and new inspector teams will generally consist of four inspectors for inspections and two inspectors for visits (compared with seven currently).
- 2.2 Standard inspections will be for up to two weeks and short inspections for up to one week. Focused visits will normally be for two days. Detailed specifications of the data/information that must be provided in the week before the inspection have been provided, which is known as 'Annex A' information.

- 2.3 Local authorities will receive an overall effectiveness rating of outstanding, good, requires improvement to be good, or inadequate. Key judgements will also be made in the following areas:
- Experiences and progress of children in need of help and protection;
 - Experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers;
 - The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families.
- 2.4 The three key judgements have between four and seven domains describing 'good' performance, with narrative explaining how higher or lower judgements may be arrived at.
- 2.5 For the judgement on children needing help and protection, these relate to offering help early; responding appropriately to needs; decision-making and actions taken; quality of management; engagement with children/young people; and addressing abuse.
- 2.6 For the judgement on looked-after children/care leavers, these relate to decision-making; engagement with children and young people; reducing risks; meeting health needs; education and social and leisure activities; providing stable living situations and achieving permanence; and meeting the needs of care leavers.
- 2.7 For the judgement on leadership, these relate to strategic leadership; the culture of the organisation; performance management; and suitable workforce/working environment.

The Self-Evaluation

- 2.8 In preparation for the Annual Engagement Meetings, the Local Authority is required to produce a Self-Evaluation (SEF). The self-evaluation is framed around the three key inspection areas above and focuses on responding to three questions:
1. What do you know about the quality and impact of social work practice in your local authority?
 2. How do you know it?
 3. What are your plans for the next 12 months to maintain or improve practice?
- 2.9 The annual engagement meeting does not result in a judgement of the local authority's performance and no output is published.
- 2.10 The contents of this report are based upon the findings of our most recent Self Evaluation in December 2022, which is at **Appendix A**.

3. The Improvement Context

- 3.1 Whilst OFSTED apply a context-free approach to evaluating Children's Service i.e. they do not take into account wider contextual factors, it is vitally important it is understood that the background against, and landscape within, which improvement is required is exceptionally challenging.

- 3.2 A significant period of time (since the 2019 inspection) has been spent under pandemic-conditions. This placed significant strains on safeguarding services across the nation, forcing them to operate in ways that they were not used and stripped of many of the protective factors for children and families that would usually be there (e.g. Schools). It also placed understandable pressure on front-line social work services to maintain services and effectively safeguarding children and young people in ways that they were not ordinarily used to.
- 3.3 Barking and Dagenham is one of the poorest boroughs in the country, experiencing many of the associated challenges of poverty such as high levels of neglect and domestic abuse. These factors were only exacerbated by the pandemic – and more latterly the cost-of-living crisis – with already low levels of resilience amongst many of our families pushed beyond breaking point.
- 3.4 The borough is also growing rapidly, with one of the fastest increasing child populations in the country. The impacts of economic migration are felt – with families moving into the borough (both under their own steam, but also as a result of other Local Authorities taking advantage of our relatively low cost of housing) and many do so with complex needs requiring intervention and support from the Council.
- 3.5 The Social Care workforce market is under enormous pressure and Children’s Services in Barking and Dagenham continue to feel the impacts of this. Recruitment is very difficult, with many practitioners choosing careers in other Local Authority areas where it is perceived as ‘easier’ to practice (and often that perception is correct). This is compounded by a desire to continuously ‘raise the bar’ of quality, requiring robust performance management of those in the workforce unable to meet this challenge.
- 3.6 The service, like the rest of the Council, has to deliver improvements within understandable financial constraints. Whilst there has been investment made into Children’s Care and Support since the last inspection, it has been relatively modest (compared the levels of growth being experienced). The service works hard to contain its budgets as best as it can, but this is increasingly difficult in a competitive recruitment climate and, in particular, a placements and provide market that has seen very significant inflation in costs over recent years.
- 3.7 Grappling with historical policy decisions has also taken some time. The legacy of choices made under the Ambition 2020 programme (such as locating MASH and Early Help outside of Children’s Services) is one that has been reversed, but recovering from the impacts of this has taken some time.

4. Current Assessment

- 4.1 Appended to this report is the most recent Self Assessment completed in December 2022. This document shows good progress in many areas, with some stand-out features being:
- A journey of continuous improvement and transforming services in the context of considerable challenges.
 - Children are consistently kept safe from immediate harm throughout.

- Social workers and leaders continue to be passionate about doing their best for vulnerable children and families.
- Positive staff morale, social workers report feeling well supported and cared for by their managers and leaders.
- A comprehensive training and career progression pathway offer sees many staff staying and progressing in LBBD.
- Strong evidence of service user feedback evidencing a relational practice framework where children and families experience practitioners who are supportive, caring, non- judgmental and kind.
- A high support high challenge QA approach , with robust quality assurance activities informing improvement plans , whilst always celebrating strong practice.

4.2 The current assessment is that the service is an 'Improving Requires Improvement' in OFSTED 'judgement' terms. That is, the judgement in 2019 was one of a service towards the lower end of the 'Requires Improvement' judgement, and it is now much closer to the top end with the threshold of 'Good'. In some aspects the service is showing signs of 'Good' features – such as in Leadership and Management and the experiences of our Children in Care. The service is improving, but the pace and consistency of that improvement needs to increase further still.

4.3 Our Self Evaluation is also clear about where our focus needs to be in the coming months, setting out as it does our priorities for 2023. These are:

- Cracking consistency in the quality and impact of social work practice– with focus on:
 - Supervision and management oversight.
 - Quality planning informed by the child's lived experience and outcomes– (this includes safety planning , CP and CIN purposeful plans and permanence planning).
 - Purposeful visits and direct work.
 - Application of threshold.
- Further improving permanence for children in line with Ofsted Focused Visit in May 2022.
- Refreshed Practice Standards, Practice framework and a suite of risk assessment tools to support consistency of quality practice.
- Increasing level of permanent staff in the Assessment and Life planning services.
- Restructure Adolescent service to strengthen the offer for vulnerable adolescents and harness the good practice in that service.
- Develop a strengthened participation offer for our children in care and care leavers.
- SEND improvement work through the SEND Area Board (and to support preparations for a separate SEND Inspection).
- Developing the Family Hub/Early Help offer as part of our Early Help and Start for Life Improvement Programme.
- Implement the new Domestic Abuse offer.
- Strengthen sufficiency of placements options.

How do we know it?

- 4.4 During 2022 we introduced additional, significant capacity to work within Quality Assurance to ensure that there is adequate reach, at sufficient pace to cover our service as a whole. Known as our 'QA Leads', each has a dedicated service area of focus. In addition to our QA Leads, we have established a small unit of experienced, interim support to ensure there is sufficient oversight of continuous improvement, and to provide support to operational leadership to deliver.
- 4.5 A comprehensive programme to better understand the quality of practice from across the services is now embedded. This programme is supported through our Quality Assurance Division detailing a monthly review of focused areas to sit alongside our business-as-usual programme of audit and practice evaluation. This programme is underpinned with an approach of working alongside practitioners and managers and seeks to embed a culture of learning from the findings and themes arising from both our monthly audit and practice evaluation programme.

5. Financial Implications

Implications completed by: Philippa Farrell, Head of Service Finance

- 5.1 Children's Care and Support remains the biggest service area of spend for Barking and Dagenham, which is unsurprising given the context as outlined above. Barking and Dagenham has a rapidly growing younger populations, with one of the fastest increasing child populations in the country. It is subject to economic migration as one of the cheapest places to live within London and has very high levels of deprivation. A combination of these factors sees high levels of children requiring intervention. As such, the Council has continued to prioritise investment into this area but this is a complex balance when taking into account the financial challenges that Councils are facing as a whole.
- 5.2 Since 2019 the Council has increased Children's Care and Support Budget from c£37m to £42m in 2022/23. In addition there has been dedicated funding of £2m from 2022/23 for Early Help provision. Despite this, the area has continued to struggle with the impact of rising demand, rising economic pressure within the sector, and recruitment and retention, which has seen overspends in every financial year. 2022/23 is forecasting an outturn net expenditure of c£45m as at Period 9 reporting. The Medium Term Financial Plan for 2023/24 to 2026/27 has identified a further £1m to be invested into Children's Care and Support and £0.5m into Early Help.
- 5.3 Within 2022/23 there was a specific in-year investment of £800k to address the need to introduce additional, significant capacity to work within Quality Assurance and we established a small number of experienced, interim support to ensure there is sufficient oversight of continuous improvement, and to provide support to operational leadership to deliver.
- 5.4 The macro political environment surrounding Children's Care and Support with a lack of funding and market control in addition to the Council's unique circumstances with regards to population growth, deprivation and the availability of cheap housing combines to make this area financially challenging and a risk to the Council. Investment is prioritised but this must be balanced within the overall financial

position of the Council. The Council overall is feeling the impact of the economic climate, the legacy of COVID, and a period of significant financial uncertainty in relation to funding due to political events.

6. Legal Implications

Implications completed by: Daniel Longe, Principal Solicitor, Children Safeguarding

- 6.1 Section 118 and 136 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 gives the Secretary of State Statutory Powers to direct the Chief Inspector to conduct an inspection of the performance of a local authority's functions, including those functions as it pertains to its Children's Services.
- 6.2 Further guidance and framework is set out in detail in the Inspecting Local Authority Children's Services (ILAC) Guidance, the recent version of which came into force of 1 January 2023.
- 6.3 Local Authorities are under a specific duty to ensure a high standard in the delivery of services to children in its area. This is graded as set out within the body of this report and the lowest grading that can be issued by Ofsted being "inadequate", such a grading could invoke further intervention from the Secretary of State hence the importance of maintaining a high standard of service delivery.
- 6.4 This report is providing an update on the steps being taken to improve standards within Children Services in light of the outcome of the last inspection, with the aim of improving the local authority's rating from "Requires Improvement" to a higher rating. The recommendations within the report are within the remit and powers of the local authority as mandated by statute.

Public Background Papers Used in the Preparation of the Report:

- OFSTED guidance on inspecting local authority children's services from 2018 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inspecting-local-authority-childrens-services-from-2018>

List of appendices:

- **Appendix A:** OFSTED Self Evaluation 2022 Presentation