

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

11 October 2023

Title: Report on the OFSTED Inspection of Children's Services and arrangements for publishing the Council's OFSTED Improvement Plan	
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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Accountable Director: April Bald; Operational Director for Children's Care and Support	
Accountable Strategic Leadership Director: Elaine Allegretti; Strategic Director for Children's and Adults	
Summary: <p>In July the Council was subject to a Standard Inspection under the OFSTED Inspection of Local Authority Children's Service (ILACS) framework. Following initial feedback provided at the conclusion of the inspection the final 'OFSTED Letter' formally setting-out OFSTED's findings was published on 4 September 2023.</p> <p>This report sets out the headlines from the published findings, including, but not limited to, the 8 named areas for improvement that OFSTED have made.</p> <p>In response to these recommendations the Council is required to develop and publish an improvement plan by 11 December 2023. This report begins to discuss this plan, though so soon after the publication of the letter this remains a work in progress at this stage.</p> <p>It is anticipated that once the plan is developed and agreed by the Council a further update – including upon progress – will be made to Overview and Scrutiny in the future, at the Committees' discretion.</p>	
Recommendation(s) <p>Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">Note the findings of the OFSTED ILACS Inspection of Children's Services in July 2023.Note to the publication of the OFSTED Improvement Plan that we are required to produce, and publish, by 11 December 2023.Consider when further scrutiny of this item will be best undertaken in the future.	
Reasons <ul style="list-style-type: none">The OFSTED Improvement Plan is a key plank of the Council's plans to continue improvement to Children's Social Care; and <p>The Council is required to publish the OFSTED Improvement Plan by 11 December 2023.</p>	

1. Introduction and Background

- 1.1 Between 3 July 2023 and the 21 July 2023, the Council was subject to a Standard Inspection under the OFSTED Inspection of Local Authority Children's Service (ILACS) framework.
- 1.2 During this three-week period inspectors met with key officers, including the Chief Executive and Director of Children's Services, as well as the Lead Member for Children's Services. The bulk of inspectors time, however, was spent meeting with a wide range of frontline officers observing the direct work and practice of frontline Social Workers as well as reviewing the case files of children and young people.
- 1.3 Following initial feedback provided at the conclusion of the inspection the final 'OFSTED Letter' formally setting-out OFSTED's findings was published on 4 September 2023. This report sets out the headlines from the published findings, including, but not limited to, the 8 named recommendations that OFSTED have made.
- 1.4 In response to these recommendations the Council is required to develop and publish an improvement plan by 11 December 2023. So soon after the conclusion of the inspection, this remains a work in progress at the time of writing and will be presented to the Council's Cabinet for ratification prior to publication.

2. The Context of Improvement

- 2.1 The context within which the findings of the inspection must be considered is not unimportant, and the past four years, since the 2019 inspection, have been some of the most challenging we have experienced. The challenging nature of the wider landscape has been alluded to in the letter from the inspection team, and throughout the inspection this was a topic of discussion.
- 2.2 Our borough is growing rapidly – 18% since the 2011 census – at the third fastest rate in England and Wales (with a further 7% growth expected by 2025), and we have the highest proportion of our population aged under-16 in the country (26.1%). It is also changing, with the greatest increase in ethnic diversity of all English & Welsh local authorities between the 2011 and 2021 censuses – 18.6 percentage point increase in % non-White British residents.
- 2.3 The borough has 9,400 (12.8%) lone parent households with dependent children – the highest proportion in England and Wales – and the 4th highest average household size (2.96).
- 2.4 6 out of 10 households on the borough are deprived (the highest in England and Wales) and 5.6% residents aged 16 and over were unemployed (including full-time students) – 7th highest proportion in England and Wales. 18% of economically inactive residents aged 16 and over have never worked, and the borough has the highest proportion of households in London where at least one person identified as disabled (29.8%).
- 2.5 These factors alone lead to increasing demand for our statutory service, and that is before we consider the impact of the pandemic during the period since the last inspection, and an increase of 50% at one point in the number of cases open to

Children’s Social Care – though this has now receded to a more usual rate of attrition. The current cost of living crisis is also impacting disproportionately upon our residents and, by extension therefore, our services.

- 2.6 Alongside these factors remains the challenging financial landscape that Council has faced – and continues to face. This is outlined further in the ‘financial implications’ section of this report.

3. Summary of Findings

- 3.1 The judgement from the OFSTED inspection is that services for children in Barking and Dagenham ‘requires improvement to be good’, as was the case at the last inspection.

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children in care	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

- 3.2 Although services for children requires improvement to be good, OFSTED inspectors reported that there have been improvements since the previous inspection in 2019.
- 3.3 The report outlines that leaders have an understanding of strengths and weaknesses, commonly referred to as “knowing ourselves”. It was acknowledged that action has been taken to increase social work capacity, to help manage demand and give workers more time for direct support for children and families, and that some of the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection have been addressed.
- 3.4 Inspectors found that the positive impact of leaders is evident in the progress made in a number of important areas for children, and that the senior management team for children’s services is stable and has remained consistent – far from a given – though also reported that the service’s lean management structure has made it harder to manage the volume of need and provide the essential oversight, direction and supervision required to ensure that children make progress.
- 3.5 They also observed that leaders are resilient, show fortitude and flexibility, and are creating an enabling, learning culture to support staff development, and that progress in creating an increasingly stable workforce has been hard sought, with purposeful campaigns to recruit staff from overseas, a competitive recruitment package and steps to support career progression.

- 3.6 Inspectors found that social workers like working in the borough and enjoy the rich diversity and the availability of community resources. There is an enthusiastic approach to training and good opportunities to develop experience and expertise, with a strong offer to support internal career advancement.
- 3.7 The final comment of the report, perhaps the most notable is that inspectors found that social workers are supported by an open and supportive management team and an environment where practice is beginning to flourish.

Areas of strengths and positive practice

- 3.8 Within the inspection report, there are many areas of strength and examples of positive practice. A full breakdown of strengths and weaknesses can be found at **Appendix A**, with the following paragraphs providing a summary of the headline findings.
- 3.9 Children and families were found to have access to a good range of universal and targeted early help provision and Early Help workers complete assessments and plans that are of good quality, so there is effective support for children, with intervention timely. It was noted that we have invested corporate funding to support an ambitious and updated early help strategy, which will involve delivery through new 'family hubs'.
- 3.10 The MASH engages quickly with families and ensures that parental consent and shared multi-agency information are in place, and most children and families get the right level of help at the right time, and when a more urgent response is required, this is escalated appropriately. The emergency duty team was praised in the inspection and judged as well resourced, experienced, and effective.
- 3.11 Action is taken for immediate protection of children and assessments are mostly of good quality, and for most children timely, appropriate decisions being made for them and their families. Most assessments, including those for disabled children, are comprehensive, include multi-agency views and are informed by history.
- 3.12 There is a strong multi-agency approach to contextual safeguarding for children, whether they live at home or are in care. When children go missing, timely strategy meetings result in comprehensive multi-agency risk assessment and safety planning.
- 3.13 Where successful and timely pre-proceedings are secured, this significantly changes the lived experiences of children, allowing them to live safely with their families without the need to initiate proceedings. For children subject to proceedings, the quality and timeliness of assessments and reports to the family court are improving.
- 3.14 Local authority designated officer arrangements are effective and ensure that children are adequately safeguarded. We They take robust action to safeguard children who are missing education and any children being educated at home who are vulnerable.
- 3.15 Once children come into care, they are appropriately matched with carers who meet their cultural and identity needs. - Placement stability is enhanced with

support from the Special Intervention Service (SIS), so that children can remain with consistent carers and gain a sense of security.

- 3.16 Overall, social workers know their children well and they are significant, consistent people in children's lives. IROs recognise when delays affect children's lives, and the escalation process is becoming increasingly effective so that actions to progress plans are implemented.
- 3.17 The borough's independent visiting scheme is a real strength. It provides long term stable and committed relationships that add significantly to children's well-being, and the successful recruitment of foster carers is a strength. Managers and staff attract new carers who live within or near to the borough.
- 3.18 Most health assessments are carried out in a timely manner and result in thorough healthcare plans and sufficient information to ensure that carers can meet children's health needs effectively. Where children have more complex health needs, appropriate assessments inform medication reviews, which are regularly updated to ensure a dynamic response to children's medical needs.
- 3.19 Committed and dedicated Leaving Care Advisors successfully build nurturing and trusting relationships with care leavers. Pathway plans are collaboratively created with care leavers, reflecting their individuality and their views, wishes and aspirations. Most plans identify and address care leavers' unique needs well.
- 3.20 Staff routinely undertake risk assessments and care leavers' circumstances are considered by the multi-agency child exploitation panel, thereby coordinating information to inform safety planning, and reducing risk for care leavers. Care leavers' health needs are mostly well considered in their pathway plans.
- 3.21 There has been a tangible commitment from senior council leaders to improve the quality of children's services with investment to increase social work capacity. Additional social work capacity and recruitment have helped to manage caseloads.
- 3.22 We have set out clear expectations and practice standards, with guidance from centres of excellence supporting practice in complex areas of social work such as child sexual abuse, child exploitation and homelessness and have introduced a revised quality assurance framework and practice evaluation programme. This has ensured that we have accurate information on the standards of social work practice in the service.

Areas of improvement including the 8 key Ofsted recommendations

- 3.23 Inspectors concluded that progress is not consistent nor equitable for some children living in the borough. This has prevented the authority from achieving a judgement of good at this inspection. In particular, the pressures on management capacity, which were identified at the last inspection, continue to hinder the oversight and supervision needed to support effective frontline practice. This is evident in a lack of decisive intervention for some children who are exposed to long-term neglect and domestic abuse, and in delays in progressing permanence plans and life-story work for some children in care.
- 3.24 For a small number of children, thresholds are inconsistently applied, so that families do not receive help that is reflective of their needs when stepped down

from MASH and Strategy meetings in the assessment teams are not always held in a timescale that is consistent with identified risks to children.

- 3.25 The quality of Child in Need and Child Protection Plans remains variable, and for a small number of number of children, intervention is overoptimistic and does not take account sufficiently of historical concerns to inform future and contingency planning.
- 3.26 We need to improve the quality and impact of pre-proceedings work undertaken within the Public Law Outline, where consistency is a challenge and practice does not always take enough account of the child's lived experience, and a small number of children wait too long for help and remain in situations which are unstable, potentially harmful and do not provide a sense of security.
- 3.27 Some children's entry to care comes late, when they have been the subject of repeat interventions and have been living in situations of unaddressed neglect for too long, and permanence planning meetings are not of sufficient quality to enable actions towards achieving timely permanence to be effective.
- 3.28 Our lean management structure has made it harder to manage the volume of need and provide the essential oversight, direction and supervision required to ensure that children make progress, and the consistent application and embedding of practice pathways are not yet confidently in place, so children are not always benefiting from this practice knowledge.
- 3.29 We have struggled to ensure consistently timely interventions for children who experience long-term neglect, and this must be a priority area of focus.

What needs to improve?

- 3.30 In addition to the above, OFSTED identified 8 key recommendations where they felt improvement was most strongly required. These are:
- Timeliness of strategy meetings.
 - The capacity, quality, consistency and impact of supervision and management oversight.
 - Assessment and decision-making for children experiencing neglect.
 - Timeliness of pre-proceedings pathways.
 - Consistency of response to 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless.
 - Oversight of children's placements in unregistered children's homes.
 - Application of threshold in early help.
 - Life-story work and permanency planning.

4. Next Steps: Improvement Plan

- 4.1 We are required to publish an Improvement Plan by 11 December 2023. This plan should outline our response to the recommendations made by OFSTED, and progress against delivery will be reflected in our Annual Self-Evaluation and monitored by OFSTED at the Annual Engagement Meeting.

- 4.2 Given that it is so soon after the inspection, our Action Plan is in the process of being drafted and not yet ready for publication – though it is beginning to take shape and, in fact, in some cases – such as improving the processes for oversight of children in unregulated placements – is already being implemented.
- 4.3 This improvement plan will need to be incorporated into a wider programme of work that is being planned to look at the organisational structure(s) of our services, including the correct positioning of the Targeted Early Help and Children with Disabilities Services that both currently sit outside of the Operational Service Block, and will need to be reincorporated.
- 4.4 Once completed, the OFSTED Improvement Plan will be presented to Senior Leaders and Members for approval prior to submission on 11th. Overview and Scrutiny Committee may wish to determine an appropriate point to review the progress made at a future juncture.

5 Consultation

- 5.1 The OFSTED Improvement Plan is being developed in conjunction with key stakeholders across the Council, including the Lead Member for Children's Services. This included colleagues outside of Children's Care and Support who will play a significant role in delivering the improved outcomes for our children and young people.
- 5.2 Findings from the inspection will also be presented to the Local Safeguarding Children Partnership. Once published the LSCP will be briefed on the part they must play, both now and in future. This Improvement Plan will also be formally presented to the local Health and Wellbeing Board and NEL ICB.

6 Financial Implications

Implications completed by: Antony Envoldsen-Harris

- 6.1 This report covers the outcome of the Ofsted inspection with no reference to costs/budgets. As it stands there are no financial implications identified. This is likely to change once the improvement plan has been completed and published, finance would need to review and verify anything presented in that plan.

7 Legal Implications

Implications completed: Daniel Longe, Principal Solicitor, In-House Advocates Team.

- 7.1 The report sets out the findings from the recent Ofsted inspection carried out in July 2023. As a result of that inspection, Ofsted have directed the local authority to put together an improvement plan and this report sets out Children's Services' plan in that regard. The contents of this report do not carry any legal implications and are rightly within the scope and framework of the statutory duties imposed under the Children Act 1989.

8. Other Implications

- 8.1 Risk Management – there is significant risk in failing to deliver an adequate Children's Service. There are considerable risks to the children and young people who we have a duty to safeguard, as well as the risks to the Council of failing to

adequately discharge statutory duties. As part of our governance and programme management arrangements, risks are being identified and will be managed through this process.

- 8.2 Staffing Issues – any staffing issues will be outlined in the wider Children’s Improvement Programme report when presented.
- 8.3 Safeguarding – safeguarding children is *the* core focus of the OFSTED Improvement Plan.

Public Background Papers Used in the Preparation of this Report

- London Borough of Barking and Dagenham: Inspection of Children’s Social Care Services (OFSTED Letter) September 2023

List of Appendices

- Appendix A: Summary of Strengths and Areas of Improvement Table
- Appendix B: London Borough of Barking and Dagenham: Inspection of Children’s Social Care Services (OFSTED Letter) September 2023.