

Report into Children's Social Care Services in the London Borough of Barnet

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1. Introduction

1.1 Barnet's services for children were inspected by Ofsted in April and May 2017. They were found to be inadequate across all reported categories, with grades of 'requires improvement' in the sub-categories relating to adoption and to the experiences and progress of care leavers. The inspection raised serious questions surrounding the quality of practice and leadership, including in relation to the borough's focus on children, its quality assurance systems and the quality of management oversight. The Barnet Safeguarding Children Board (BSCB) was also found to be inadequate. I was appointed Commissioner for Children's Services in the London Borough of Barnet in August 2017 by the Secretary of State for Education. The terms of reference required me to:

- 1.1.1 issue any necessary instructions to the local authority for the purpose of securing immediate improvement in the authority's delivery of children's social care; to identify ongoing improvement requirements; and to recommend any additional support required to deliver those improvements;
- 1.1.2 bring together evidence to assess the council's capacity and capability to improve itself, in a reasonable timeframe, and recommend whether or not this evidence is sufficiently strong to suggest that long-term sustainable improvement to children's social care can be achieved should operational service control continue to remain with the council;
- 1.1.3 advise on relevant alternative delivery and governance arrangements for children's social care, outside of the operational control of the local authority, taking account of local circumstances and the views of the council and key partners; and,
- 1.1.4 report to the Minister of State for Children and Families.

1.2 An accompanying Direction was issued to the London Borough of Barnet instructing their cooperation with the review. The Direction can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/direction-issued-to-barnet-council>

1.3 This report follows my review and sets out:

- 1.3.1 some **background and context**;
- 1.3.2 the **approach and processes** adopted for the review;
- 1.3.3 the **findings of the review** relating to the causes behind the failure and the barriers to sustained improvement;
- 1.3.4 in the light of those findings, the **action being taken by the Council to remove barriers** to make rapid and sustained improvements for children in Barnet, and any **further action required**;
- 1.3.5 **conclusions and recommendations**.

1.4 This report does not seek to reprise the detail of the Ofsted inspection. The reports are available at: https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/local_authority_reports/barnet/051_Single%20inspection%20of%20LA%20children%27s%20services%20as%20pdf.pdf

Nor does it seek to detail every aspect of practice, structure and context in Barnet. The Ofsted report includes contextual information on the general, children in need and looked after populations in the borough. The Improvement Plan which Barnet and its partners have produced and submitted to Ofsted is available on Barnet's website. My report covers those areas which are significant in addressing the requirements of the terms of reference above, particularly in relation to the future governance and delivery of children's services in Barnet so that vulnerable children in Barnet can get the support and improved outcomes that they need and deserve.

- 1.5 Inevitably, a three-month review of this nature and breadth of scope is an imposition on a local authority and its partners during a period of great pressure for all involved. I have been well supported in my task by colleagues in Barnet, including by the Chief Executive and his senior team; the Director of Children's Services (DCS) and his team; front line staff and their managers; senior managers; the Leader, Lead Member for children and young people; other members; and partners. Their honest engagement has ensured that the review was able quickly to get to the heart of the key issues and helped me to take an open and transparent approach throughout. I am very grateful to all colleagues in Barnet and my particular thanks go to Lucy Law for her excellent logistical support provided during the course of the review period.

2. Background and context

- 2.1 Prior to the 2017 inspection, Barnet's services for children and young people were last inspected by Ofsted in 2012. They were found to be 'good' across the piece and earlier unannounced visits also showed the Local Authority's services to have many strengths. Within the context of a strong service overall, some themes in common with the 2017 report were raised in earlier reports. For example, aspects of quality of provision were found to be 'adequate' with issues raised around the variability of assessments and planning, and some drift in cases identified. The difference in inspection frameworks and methodologies is such that comparisons and conclusions are hard to draw. Nevertheless, it is clear that services have deteriorated significantly over the last five years.
- 2.2 Some of the history of senior structural changes in Barnet is relevant to understanding the position reached in April 2017. From 2013, Barnet began to develop and adopt a new approach across the Council to implement a commissioning/delivery split for services. The intention was to bring a similar rigour to internally delivered services as would be found with externally commissioned services. By 2015, a full new senior structure was in place. The commissioning side of the Council, led by a Strategic Director for Commissioning, would specify requirements and monitor the quality of the delivery arm. Those leading the delivery of services reported directly to the Chief Executive.
- 2.3 In relation to children's services, this 2015 structure saw a newly appointed DCS reporting to the Strategic Director for Commissioning rather than to the Chief Executive, with a separate Family Services Director (appointed in 2013), responsible for running children's social care services, reporting to the Chief Executive. A further Director ran the Education Delivery Unit and this was fully outsourced in April 2016. Corporately, the top team comprised a Strategic Commissioning Board (SCB) with a remit to provide overall management and leadership of the Council. This Board included senior managers from the Commissioning side of the Council, including the DCS, alongside the Chief Operating Officer and Assurance senior managers. Those Directors running the services in the Delivery Units were not members of the top team although they attended as required for particular items. Within the context of the challenges facing local Government, and while still having regular assurance sessions, the SCB focused its attention mainly on transformational and strategic change issues rather than on 'business as usual' delivery matters.
- 2.4 All organisational structures can be made to work, and different structures bring different risks. The risks of confused accountabilities in the Barnet structure were higher than in more traditional structures and mitigation of those risks would require particularly close working and understanding between commissioning and delivery senior managers. Issues relating to how children's services were affected by the operation of Barnet's approach are covered in Section 4 of this report.
- 2.5 In terms of governance, in 2014, the Council moved from a Cabinet and Scrutiny system to a decision-making Committee system. Themed decision-making Committees were established instead of a Cabinet and scrutiny committees,

including a Children, Education, Libraries and Safeguarding Committee (CELS). In addition, cross-cutting decision-making Committees were set up, including a Policy and Resources Committee, chaired by the Leader, responsible for strategic policy and plans; and a Performance and Contract Management Committee responsible for scrutinising performance across the Council in relation to the Corporate Plan, including performance relating to children and young people's services. This Committee looks, in particular, at the large outsourced contracts which Barnet has in place for a significant number of its key services. The Lead Member for Children and Young People became the Chair of the CELS Committee. An informal Leader's Briefing brings together Chairs of Committees five or six times a year. Politically, Barnet is a marginal borough. The Conservatives have an overall majority of one seat. London local government elections are due in May 2018. Issues relating to governance and children's services are raised in Section 4 below.

- 2.6 Shortly after his appointment in 2015, the DCS recognised that there were issues of concern in the borough's children's social care services. In January 2016, Essex County Council was commissioned to carry out a diagnostic exercise to provide an independent view of Barnet's services. That diagnostic was completed in March 2016 and found serious concerns in child protection services with *'individual cases of children left at unacceptable significant risk and requiring immediate attention and re-assessment'*. It also found areas 'requiring improvement' across Looked After Children and other aspects of the service. Following the diagnostic, the DCS was given full responsibility for the delivery as well as the commissioning of family services in Barnet.
- 2.7 Over the year from March 2016 to the point of inspection in April 2017, much activity ensued, designed to improve services and their impact on vulnerable children. In particular, with support from the new Interim Chief Executive and corporate colleagues, a new IT system was introduced, and work was done to improve caseloads and to bring down the level of agency staffing. An Improvement Board was set up under the chairmanship of the Interim Chief Executive and an Improvement Plan was developed. New senior managers in the service were appointed in late 2016. Essex County Council provided periodic advice and completed a follow-up diagnostic in February and March 2017. That exercise found improvements, although it still identified variable and inconsistent practice.
- 2.8 The Council brought in an experienced adviser to review the Barnet Safeguarding Children Board (BSCB) in February 2017. In April 2017, she began to work with partners to develop and implement changes to the Board's operation. This work was well received and continued following the inspection result.
- 2.9 In terms of other partnership structures, there is a Safer Communities Partnership Board, a Health and Wellbeing Board, and a senior borough officers' group which meets quarterly. While there is a current Children and Young People's Plan and a Children's Partnership Board, the latter has only met twice since July 2014.
- 2.10 Following the publication of the inspection report, in July 2017, a decision was made to bring in an independent Chair to lead the Improvement Board. The Executive Director for Social Care and Education at Essex County Council was appointed to this role. He chaired his first meeting in September 2017.

3. Approach and process of the review

3.1 In order to meet the requirements of the Terms of Reference in 1.1 above, I divided the review into three phases:

3.1.1 *Phase 1: an intensive period to understand the borough in depth.* This included meeting with: front line staff and their managers across children's social care services; senior managers from across the Council as well as in Children's Services; elected members from both major parties, including the Chair and members of the Children, Education, Libraries and Safeguarding Committee (CELS); Chairs of other key Committees; colleagues from Essex as their role as the borough's Improvement Partner developed; and senior managers across the children's partnership, including senior colleagues from the CCG, police and schools. In addition, as part of Phase 1, I attended a range of existing meetings, including the Children's Services Improvement Board, and throughout the review, I met with staff on the floor as they worked on cases.

3.1.2 The purpose of this Phase was to understand clearly:

- the reasons behind the failures in children's services – i.e. why the recommendations made by Ofsted had become necessary; and why activity undertaken from early 2016 had failed to impact on improving practice and outcomes for children;
- any barriers to rapid and sustained improvement for Barnet's children;
- how those barriers might best be removed, at pace; and
- the Council's corporate and governance capacity and capability to deliver the necessary change immediately and sustain that improvement over time.

3.1.3 Understanding these four factors in depth was critical to the terms of reference of the review which required me to consider whether alternative governance delivery arrangements are necessary to bring about the necessary improvement in Barnet.

3.1.4 *Phase 2: feedback and consideration of ways forward to remove barriers to improvement.* This phase involved feeding back my findings and possible ways forward in various forums to key colleagues. This involved meetings with the Leader, Chair of CELS and Chief Executive; the Strategic Commissioning Board (SCB) comprising the Chief Executive and his senior team; the DCS's Senior Management Team, the Chair of the Improvement Board and key senior partners. Receiving their reactions and views on the evidence I presented, helped to bring forward further evidence in relation to the recommendations made in this report.

3.1.5 *Phase 3: report writing and further feedback.*

3.2 In addition to the work set out above, I joined the Chief Executive and the DCS for a full staff briefing. At this briefing, I shared with staff the terms of reference for the review, including the presumption of withdrawal of services, and set out some principles for the review. I committed to:

- being independent of both Barnet and the DfE, within the terms of the review;
- being transparent, with ongoing feedback to ensure no surprises;
- not repeating the inspection, the findings of which are clear;
- listening and taking account of all views and insights from front-line staff, managers and others, and across the partnership;
- supporting and fuelling their improvement, including that which is already underway – the review must be part of ensuring Barnet’s children’s outcomes improve, not get in the way of that or cause any pause in action;
- minimising the burden of the review by using existing forums to listen and learn as much as possible; and,
- there being no pre-determined outcome of the review.

3.3 In order to ensure the promised transparency, I met regularly with the Chief Executive and DCS to keep them in touch with the review’s progress and ensured that the Leader and Lead Member were fully sighted.

3.4 In line with the terms of reference for the review and the Direction to Barnet, I made recommendations for action throughout the period of the review which were designed to support and steer the improvement efforts already underway.

4. Findings – reasons behind the failure and barriers to improvement

- 4.1 As indicated above, my initial purpose was to understand both the reasons behind why the serious and systemic recommendations made by Ofsted had become necessary and the barriers to rapid and sustained improvement for Barnet's children. Work to improve services had been ongoing for at least a year prior to the inspection, following the diagnostic completed by colleagues from Essex. I was therefore also concerned to understand why that work had not had the necessary impact on improving the lives and life chances of Barnet's most vulnerable children. Understanding these aspects would then allow an informed evaluation of how best any barriers might be removed to secure improvement for children, at pace. As set out in Section 5, many of the issues raised in this section are already being addressed by colleagues across the Council in Barnet and by partners.
- 4.2 I found many **strengths** in Barnet, including:
- 4.2.1 committed and dedicated staff at every level of the organisation, including front line social workers and their managers; senior managers and SCB;
 - 4.2.2 strong determination and willingness to put right what had gone wrong from the Leader, the Lead Member, other senior members from both main political parties and from the Chief Executive and his SCB, children's services senior managers and their teams, and from partners;
 - 4.2.3 a clear understanding from senior members and the corporate leadership that children are a priority for the Council and an appetite to make that explicit;
 - 4.2.4 a clear commitment to resource the improvement effort as required with significant resource already allocated and confidence that more will be found if necessary;
 - 4.2.5 the original identification of problems in the service by the DCS;
 - 4.2.6 some strong senior managers within children's services, appointed from late 2016 and through 2017, who understand the importance of child-focused, responsive, purposeful and timely social care practice;
 - 4.2.7 evidence that brings confidence in the ability of the corporate leadership to add value, including in relation to the implementation during 2016 of a new IT system and the reduction of caseloads and agency staff;
 - 4.2.8 clear prioritisation, more generally, from the Chief Executive to secure a stronger focus from top managers on service delivery, including by dismantling the commissioning and delivery split at SCB level to address confused accountabilities and focus on securing good outcomes for residents, while driving up employee engagement;
 - 4.2.9 the commitment of partners and generally good relationships between those partners and the Council; and,
 - 4.2.10 an understanding from politicians from all sides that, despite the marginal political landscape in the borough, the safeguarding of vulnerable children should be everyone's collective concern and priority, irrespective of party

politics.

- 4.3 In relation to the ***underlying reasons for the failure*** in children's services, the reasons ***improvement work had not impacted as expected*** and the ***barriers to improvement*** in the borough, I found a range of issues, particularly in relation to:
- 4.3.1 shortcomings in leadership, and particularly a lack of experience and understanding of how to lead the 'turn-around' of failing, complex children's services to secure impact (*paragraphs 4.4 to 4.7*);
 - 4.3.2 poor use and analysis of performance and management information to drive improvements and to monitor progress and impact for children, and a lack of in-depth understanding of services (*paragraphs 4.8 to 4.10*);
 - 4.3.3 poor engagement and communication with staff leading to a serious disconnect between children's senior management and the front line (*paragraphs 4.11 to 4.16*);
 - 4.3.4 ensuring that governance adds value to the safeguarding of children in Barnet (*paragraphs 4.17 to 4.25*);
 - 4.3.5 resourcing issues (*paragraphs 4.26 to 4.28*);
 - 4.3.6 shortcomings in systems to secure good front-line practice (*paragraphs 4.29 to 4.30*).

Leadership and 'turn-around' capability

- 4.4 As indicated, colleagues in Barnet at every level are committed and determined to make a difference for their children. From late 2016, there have been some strong appointments of managers in the service who understand what good, responsive, child-focused practice looks like. These colleagues and their teams have been working extremely hard to bring about required improvements. However, while some have worked in improving contexts before, there is a lack of collective experience and expertise in leading the turnaround of a complex set of failing children's social care services and a lack of the overarching leadership required to drive success in these circumstances. While some key and important improvements had been forged by the time of the inspection, in relation to IT, caseloads and agency staff, mostly the improvement activity had not secured either the necessary pace or impact required at the front line for Barnet's children. Serious and systemic issues highlighted in the original 2016 Essex diagnostic remained evident in the Ofsted report a year later with services still not ensuring the safety or welfare of children. Despite the extensive activity, there remained a widespread lack of focus on the child, ineffective analysis of risk and children's needs, poor audit and quality assurance, weak oversight by managers and a lack of timely action leading to drift and delay for vulnerable children.
- 4.5 By the beginning of the review period, three months after the conclusion of the inspection, some improvement was notable at the front door thanks to the work of the senior managers concerned and their teams but, broadly, services were still showing the same systemic issues as had previously been highlighted. While some aspects of poor practice do take longer to improve, there are many where focused leadership and collective problem-solving should have brought about much swifter

impact.

4.6 This lack of 'turn-around' leadership experience and expertise presents the clearest barrier to improvement in Barnet. It has led to a lack of clarity, inconsistency and poor engagement in terms of setting expectations around practice standards and protocols across children's social care services. In addition to these core practice improvement issues, there were a number of matters arising from these shortcomings that required equally urgent attention:

4.6.1 critically, a focused, 'SMART' Improvement Plan was needed which clearly identified the correct priority areas and the actions required. The Improvement Plan being used and developed was unclear and not sufficiently focused on practice or leadership; it did not include timescales; it had not involved partners in its development and it did not provide a framework for galvanising staff and partners, nor for monitoring progress and impact. This was quickly accepted, and, with the support of Essex, partners and others, a new and stronger Plan was developed for submission to Ofsted;

4.6.2 a robust, inclusive Improvement Board was needed, supported by a structure which ensures actions are taken and monitored. The Improvement Board in operation was an internal Board, chaired by the Chief Executive which met too infrequently to impact on practice and received over-optimistic and unspecific reports on progress. A decision had already been made following the inspection to bring in an independent Chair for the Board and, following advice, it was quickly agreed that the new Board should include members; senior representatives of partners from schools, health and the police; and corporate colleagues. However, the first externally chaired Board only took place in September 2017, four months after the conclusion of the inspection;

4.6.3 the senior team in children's services (SMT) needed to work more effectively as a team, providing collective, strong leadership, and taking a more creative, problem-solving approach to achieving impact;

4.6.4 partners needed to be engaged and to be recognised as core participants in safeguarding children in the borough, with strong joined up approaches, comprehensive information sharing, and clarity in relation to expectations of their roles and of what they can expect from the Council's services.

4.7 Other issues relating to leadership were evident across the Council, as well as in children's services, which were not supportive of the improvement effort and therefore presented barriers:

4.7.1 **Silo working** was pervasive throughout the Council. While lack of 'join up' is often seen in large organisations, the silos found in Barnet at the corporate level mitigated against the potential of SCB to make a strong contribution to support the improvement for children. Equally, silos across children's services and partners more generally, including between safeguarding and education services, did not maximise improvement

capacity. The silo working across children's social care services has led to inconsistent practice and risk at points of transfer where the child is not put at the centre of considerations. As set out in Section 5, corporate SCB colleagues, education colleagues and partners have all been quick to respond to the findings of my review, recognising their responsibilities, and acting on them, including by becoming active members of Barnet's Improvement Board;

- 4.7.2 While recognising the need to act decisively and effectively with both **capability and capacity** issues, Barnet has been too slow in taking effective action as necessary, including to appoint new managers to rebuild capacity and capability and bring confidence to front line colleagues. There was a need for a greater sense of urgency to establish pace and momentum;
- 4.7.3 There are some **cultural issues** to be addressed at the corporate level which may relate to the legacy of the commissioning/delivery split. Because the focus of SCB had become higher level transformational and strategic change issues, day to day 'business as usual' matters began to be seen as less important and were not normally discussed at top level. In addition, Family Services had become particularly siloed within SCB which meant it did not benefit to the full from corporate support. SCB's culture has not been one of collective problem solving or understanding about the quality of the delivery of basic services. There is strong potential to deliver on the Chief Executive's objective to develop a more positive, high performance culture which can help to secure rapid and sustained improvement;
- 4.7.4 The Council is a **process-heavy organisation** with multiple approval requirements for even fairly straightforward matters. This leads to frustrations and delays which mitigate against establishing a nimble and creative improvement culture.

Use of performance information to drive improvement and understanding of services

- 4.8 Until the appointment of the DCS in 2015, and the diagnostic exercise conducted by colleagues from Essex, there was little awareness of the problems developing with children's social care.
- 4.9 While many within the service were acutely aware of the failings described by Ofsted, both before and after the inspection, there was a general lack of in-depth understanding elsewhere. Prior to the inspection, this was exacerbated by over-optimistic reporting of progress, including to the Improvement Board, and by inaccurate information arising from audits and quality assurance processes. Following the inspection, while there was a widespread acceptance of the outcome, there was a lack of real appreciation by many, including at corporate and governance levels, about the extent of the failings and the impact on children. The

common, accepted narrative from many was one of being 'almost there'. This lack of understanding of the scale of the inadequacies in services represented a significant barrier to improvement, particularly when coupled with the lack of experience and expertise to deliver the systemic improvements required, at pace.

4.10 While there is a clear understanding about the importance of using performance and management information to drive improvement and monitor impact for children, systems and approaches are poor. This represents a distinct barrier to further improvement and is also a contributory factor as to why the impact of improvement activity since 2016 has not been sufficient. There are significant amounts of data and information about performance within the borough but analysis and use of that data and information are under-developed. Monitoring has tended to focus on quantitative indicators without significant reference to the quality of practice and the impact on children. Systems are unduly bureaucratic and are not yet useful to front-line social workers or their managers in driving improvement. Some of these systems stemmed from corporate requirements which added burden without necessarily supporting either improvement or an understanding of services at corporate and governance levels.

Engagement and Communication

4.11 There is a serious disconnect between senior managers in children's social care and the front line. This is a significant barrier to improvement and also a core reason for the lack of impact of improvement efforts so far. While there have been extensive efforts by the DCS and his senior team to communicate changes to staff, these have not been successful in fully engaging front line colleagues and their managers in a collective, consistent improvement effort. It must be recognised that the churn and instability experienced by any Council following a failed inspection makes good communication and engagement particularly challenging as many staff move on and many arrive. However, it is critical to make progress in this area in order to develop a momentum for change and a nurturing and dynamic culture of improvement in which high standards and expectations can be set and met.

4.12 The lack of purposeful and systematic engagement with staff in Barnet leads to a lack of clarity and understanding about what is required of them. Equally, staff do not feel that they have the opportunity to contribute their expertise to developments – they are 'receivers' of change rather than agents of change. Many staff report frustration about the lack of follow-up when suggestions or requests are made.

4.13 Dealing quickly and decisively with capability issues is critical in improving children's social care services. Finding ways to be honest and open with staff about these changes is essential to building momentum and setting expectations. Because of the time it has taken to establish a more stable core of high quality managers, social workers have, over a year or more, experienced a chain of new managers arriving and introducing new systems without those social workers being involved or trained, with many reporting that they do not understand the changes or why they are being introduced. Those managers then quickly leave, and new managers repeat the cycle. Staff report that there is very little communication about leavers or new arrivals. While there is understanding about the need for change, including in

relation to personnel, they feel that there is a lack of transparency about how new staff are appointed.

- 4.14 While there is an established narrative around Family Services in Barnet, it has not reached the front line as a galvanising or clear vision which has meaning for social workers' everyday work.
- 4.15 A number of whistleblowing complaints have been made by staff over the last year, including very recently, relating to cultural and leadership as well as practice issues. I am satisfied that these recent complaints are being dealt with appropriately at the corporate level, including through independent reviews where required.
- 4.16 As already indicated, in relation to partners, greater engagement and involvement were required across the piece. There were particular engagement issues with schools. They were not surprised by the outcome of the inspection and had generally poor experiences with children's social care services. While there is effective communication and engagement between schools and the Local Authority's outsourced education function, the lack of direct engagement between schools and senior managers within children's social care does not build understanding or relationships in relation to safeguarding issues.

Governance

- 4.17 While issues relating to governance in Barnet were not the primary cause of failure in children's services, they can make a significant difference to fuelling and supporting the improvement effort going forward. The key question arising during the review was how to ensure that governance adds value in Barnet, particularly to those working to safeguard vulnerable children and secure the best outcomes for them.
- 4.18 As already indicated, there can be no doubt about the commitment of the Leader of the Council, the Lead Member and senior members of both major parties. All are determined to do what is required to put right the failings which have let their children down.
- 4.19 Nevertheless, it became clear that governance in Barnet has not been sufficiently focused on safeguarding children. Most members did not have a good understanding of safeguarding issues; of safeguarding work in the borough; of the needs of vulnerable children in the borough; and, significantly, of the problems growing in the service and the implications for children of the findings highlighted in the recent Ofsted inspection.
- 4.20 This is not surprising given the history of how issues have been dealt with in Barnet's Committees. Following a generally reassuring update on safeguarding going to the Children's, Education, Libraries and Safeguarding Committee (CELS) in September 2015, members of that Committee requested regular updates on the work. However, despite the new DCS's growing concerns about the service, these were not forthcoming, and members did not follow-up on their request. Even when

concerns grew to the extent that a decision was made to commission Essex to provide a diagnostic in January 2016, nothing was reported to the Committee.

- 4.21 Following the serious issues raised in the Essex report in March 2016, bilateral discussions were had between the DCS and individual members. The Leader and Lead member (Chair of CELS) were well briefed by the DCS on concerns raised, and the restructuring took place to give the DCS full responsibility and accountability for the service, as outlined in paragraph 2.6. However, the CELS Committee did not receive any reports relating to concerns highlighted in the Essex work. In May 2016, the regular general report on performance across the Council went to the cross-cutting Performance and Contracts Management Committee (PCM). Safeguarding data was set out in the body of the report but not highlighted as a particularly key issue for concern. Nevertheless, one member of that Committee requested that the CELS Committee should receive a report on safeguarding. This report was taken two months later, in July 2016. The report was over-optimistic and reassuring.
- 4.22 The CELS Committee did not receive any further report on safeguarding until a year later, in July 2017, after the publication of the Ofsted report. That report in July 2017 set out the Ofsted findings and recommended that CELS takes a standing item on safeguarding and asks for 'deep dives' into areas of concern. This was agreed by Council in the same month.
- 4.23 There are a variety of issues and questions arising from this unsatisfactory history. They include:
- 4.23.1 whether the remit of the CELS Committee is too broad. There is no doubt that the Committee had full agendas during the period concerned, taking controversial items including on libraries, school funding and school places;
 - 4.23.2 whether the split is appropriate between CELS as a 'theme' Committee tasked with looking at strategy, 'transformation' and policy but not performance, and PCM as the Committee that looks at performance across the Council. Given that PCM's prime focus has generally been Barnet's large outsourced contracts, there is a question over whether that Committee has the capacity or capability to scrutinise and monitor complex children's services effectively;
 - 4.23.3 why the culture in Barnet leads to over-optimistic and over-reassuring reporting to members. This may be due to factors such as the marginal nature of the borough's politics; the concern to maintain Barnet's reputation; custom and practice; and/or a misplaced concern to make serious safeguarding issues public prior to an Ofsted inspection. Whatever the cause, it does not serve Barnet's children effectively.
- 4.24 Notwithstanding the shortcomings in how the Committees oversaw safeguarding services, it is important to note that, as indicated earlier in this report, the quality of performance information being received by the Committees lacked the analysis required to allow effective scrutiny in any case.

- 4.25 In relation to members' under-developed understanding of children's social care, safeguarding and their responsibilities with respect to Barnet's most vulnerable children, training has been available but there has not been systematic monitoring of its quality or of member attendance. There has been no training in relation to how members can more effectively support, challenge and scrutinise the impact of their services.
- 4.26 While individual senior members have made clear their commitment and prioritisation of children during my review, the Committees tend to operate in silos. This brings less opportunity to develop a collective drive or approach for key Council priorities such as children across Committee Chairs, irrespective of their individual responsibilities.

Resources

- 4.27 While the issues arising for children in Barnet were not primarily related to resourcing, it is the case that additional resource will be required to improve services and ensure that vulnerable children in Barnet get the outcomes they deserve.
- 4.28 This is fully recognised by the Leader, members and the SCB corporately. Their commitment has been evidenced by the allocation of an additional £5.7m to the base budget for Family Services, most of which is aimed at covering demand and inflation requirements within children's social care. Of that sum, £1.8m is currently earmarked for improvement work. However, it was not clear that the resource was correctly focused on what will be required. It is also likely that more resource will be needed to deliver the new Improvement Plan effectively, including to secure further management capacity across services.
- 4.29 In February 2017, £7.4m of savings relating to Family Services had been proposed for the two financial years 2018-2020. £3.6m of this related to children's social care services. As part of the budget-setting process, the children's social care savings were reviewed following the Ofsted inspection and rightly found to be both undeliverable and inappropriate. They were adjusted down to £0.7m.

Systems to support practice and the front-line

- 4.30 The Ofsted report details the extensive concerns found relating to children's social care practice and these remained evident during my review.
- 4.31 As indicated, there was work in 2016 to implement an effective IT system for children's social care and address caseloads and high numbers of agency staff. Notwithstanding these efforts, and the efforts of the DCS and his senior team to support their extremely hard-working staff, there were a number of additional barriers to improvement evident during the review, relating to Ofsted's findings and practice on the ground, including:

- 4.31.1 a significant lack of a problem-solving and child-focused culture to underpin practice and improvement work;
- 4.31.2 poor auditing systems; a lack of accuracy in auditing; and slow feedback to social workers, which in turn slows down learning, engagement and improvement and makes it difficult to monitor progress in relation to impact for children;
- 4.31.3 issues relating to the IRO/CPC service, the culture within which it operates and its placement within the children's social care structure;
- 4.31.4 poor responsiveness to referrers from partner agencies, including schools, and the need for direct contacts with schools to build personal relationships, and better communication, engagement and understanding;
- 4.31.5 caseload issues still evident in some parts of the service;
- 4.31.6 the need for additional management capacity in some key services;
- 4.31.7 heavily bureaucratic and process-ridden practice, with multiple approval requirements, and historic systems taking up social workers' time and causing significant frustration, exacerbating workload issues and reducing time spent with children and families;
- 4.31.8 some difficult interface issues with Barnet's external contractors particularly regarding IT set-up and HR, although dedicated individuals within these services do a considerable amount to mitigate difficulties;
- 4.31.9 although an acceptable IT system is in place, issues still needed addressing, including duplicate systems, delivering usable and useful reports, and interface issues in some services, including adoption.

5. Action being taken to remove barriers to make rapid and sustained improvements for children in Barnet and further action required

- 5.1 There is no doubt that the causes of failure and barriers to improvement in Barnet are real and challenging. However, there is also no doubt that the response of the Council and its partners to the failure and to the findings and recommendations of my review has been positive and encouraging. There is now a much more consistent understanding and acceptance of the extent of the failings in services for Barnet's children.
- 5.2 For example, it was quickly accepted that there was a need for a much more focused Improvement Plan to bring clarity for all about the priority areas for action. It was encouraging to see a higher quality Plan developed at pace, with the support of the new Chair of the Improvement Board, and involving partners and corporate colleagues as well as children's social care senior managers. Although the Plan is a high-level document, it provides a much more comprehensive framework to guide and galvanise the improvement effort and it is supported by a more detailed 'action log'.
- 5.3 Equally as important and encouraging has been the transformation of the Improvement Board. Having earlier rightly decided that there was a need for the Board to be externally chaired, Barnet also accepted the need to expand the Board to include the Leader, Lead Member, corporate colleagues, and partners, and, latterly, the newly appointed Chair of the BSCB. Thanks to the new Chair of the Improvement Board, Dave Hill - the Executive Director for Social Care and Education at Essex County Council, it now operates on a much more frequent basis and is a robust, challenging and supportive forum, clearly focused on driving and monitoring the implementation of the Plan.
- 5.4 Most important has been Barnet's acceptance of the finding that there is a need for greater 'turn-around' leadership expertise and experience. As set out earlier, high quality, child-focused senior managers had been appointed prior to the inspection and more have joined the service and the senior team during the course of the review period. Barnet's social workers also work extremely hard and are fully committed to the children of the borough. If talent in the organisation is to be focused to best effect, the DCS and his senior team would need to be guided in how to secure the necessary impact, pace and sustained improvement.
- 5.5 It had always been part of Barnet's intention to engage Essex more fully as their Improvement Partner in order to support the improvement effort. The Executive Director for Social Care and Education at Essex County Council had agreed to lead Essex's input to Barnet as part of his and his Council's commitment to sector-led improvement. As the findings of my review emerged, it became clear that the nature of Improvement Partner work from Essex would need to be changed and strengthened. The Essex Executive Director and his team, who are highly experienced in how to lead sustainable improvement and change, would need to provide focused leadership, clear direction, training, monitoring and support if they

were to support and coach Barnet's senior managers effectively to bring about the necessary change and impact. A new specification for Essex's role was therefore developed and Barnet colleagues are now engaging positively with Essex within this new **Improvement Leadership Partner** model.

- 5.6 It is important to note that the support now being led by Essex is very different from the role played by Essex during 2016 and in the run-up to the inspection. At that point, Essex had been contracted simply to conduct diagnostic exercises pre-Ofsted to give an objective view of children's social care services. While colleagues from Essex stayed in touch with the DCS and his team during that period, Essex played a very light touch role, advising on specific issues as requested. Their role as now agreed with Barnet, in the light of the findings of the review, is significantly more intensive and broadly cast, developed from and building on Essex's successful track record elsewhere.
- 5.7 While practice in Barnet remains inadequate and too variable, there has been some encouraging progress on the ground with notable improvements in the capacity and capability of the MASH team and improved working with partners. This is thanks to the leadership and hard work of the Operational Director, her Heads of Service and their teams. While the borough has been too slow to act, some systems issues have now been addressed, including dismantling the duplicate IT systems operating in MASH. Critically, following Essex's advice and calibration, the auditing system is now much improved and more accurate. The quality assurance framework is contributing to setting more consistent expectations. There is a stronger sense of realism and less over-optimism about practice and improvement. These factors were endorsed by a recent Ofsted monitoring visit.
- 5.8 This section of the report sets out more of the action already being taken and planned by the Council and its partners to remove the barriers set out in Section 4, and includes further action required. It covers:
- 5.8.1 leadership, 'turn-around' capability, resourcing and practice (*paragraphs 5.10 to 5.12*);
 - 5.8.2 use of performance information to drive improvement and understanding of services (*paragraphs 5.13 to 5.17*);
 - 5.8.3 engagement and communications (*paragraphs 5.18 to 5.22*);
 - 5.8.4 governance (*paragraphs 5.23 to 5.26*).
- 5.9 To remove most of the barriers highlighted and bring about rapid and sustained improvement for children in Barnet, action is needed at three levels in each of areas set out above:
- 5.9.1 at practice level, to inject strong standards and approaches, pace, quality and consistency and the necessary management oversight;
 - 5.9.2 at Council level, to ensure that senior management and members support and fuel improvement and have robust but not over-bureaucratic approaches to performance management and quality improvement; and,
 - 5.9.3 at borough level, with partners playing their part in order to build the necessary capacity across the system to safeguard children and secure

their life chances and choices.

Leadership, 'turn-around' capability, resourcing and practice

5.10 As indicated above, it is very positive that the Council has accepted that they need additional expertise in turning around the failures in their children's social care services to secure more rapid and sustained impact for their children and young people. They accept that they need a greater sense of urgency, acting more swiftly to build capacity, capability and momentum, thereby developing a culture of improvement which has a positive effect on staff at the front line, building morale as progress and stability become evident.

5.11 In relation to this area of concern, and the findings of the review:

5.11.1 the Council has accepted the more robust role to be played by the Essex team, led by the Executive Director for Social Care and Education at Essex County Council, as their Improvement Leadership Partner. In relation to the leadership required to turn around services, the specification for Essex's role now includes:

- reporting directly to the Chief Executive on the pace of progress and on any additional requirements to secure the necessary improvements. Regular sessions with the Chief Executive and sessions with corporate leaders from SCB as required are taking place and are aimed at supporting the Chief Executive in providing strong corporate oversight, engagement and support;
- as well as robustly chairing the Improvement Board, giving direction to ensure that the officer improvement structure below the Board is effectively implementing the Plan;
- working directly with partners and other Barnet colleagues as required to support their contribution to the implementation of the Plan;
- support, direction, training, monitoring and supervision to the DCS and his SMT, guiding their activity to ensure pace and focus on what makes a difference for children;
- supporting the team to provide strong, collaborative, problem-solving, creative and engaging collective leadership for their services and for children;
- individual coaching for the DCS and members of SMT to build their expertise in order to secure a sustainable approach going forward;
- particular direction on securing a strong child-centred culture going forward;
- specific advice on key leadership areas, including on capacity and capability issues within children's social care; on the quality of appointments at management level; on the optimum use of the additional resource allocated for the implementation of the Improvement Plan; on the level of additional resource that may be required; and on the appropriateness of any savings proposed for the service;
- specific and regular support for MASH and the duty and assessment teams, particularly focusing on timeliness, thresholds and efficient operating;
- specific and regular support for the IRO and CP reviewing services, with training and development to support it adding maximum value;

- advice on the positioning of the IRO and CP reviewing services within the children's social care structure;
 - advice on removing unnecessary processes and bureaucracy from practice; and,
 - advice to ensure that effective and consistent practice guidance, thresholds and protocols are in place and being used.
- 5.11.2 the Chief Executive is providing significant support for the improvement effort, seeing it as part of the important work to develop a more positive, high performance culture across the Council. Investment has been committed into manager development to build skills and a 'permission' culture within the organisation. It is clear that this work will be critical to creating the right environment for children's services to thrive;
- 5.11.3 individual corporate members of SCB have recognised that they have a significant amount to contribute to the improvement of children's services and have responded with real energy and commitment to the findings of the review. They are working with the Chief Executive to develop SCB itself into more of a problem-solving team, focused on delivery as well as on transformational approaches to meet the ongoing challenges facing local government. In addition, they have taken responsibility for relevant aspects of the Improvement Plan and ensured that their areas of responsibility are feeding into the improvement effort. That includes action on legal services, performance management, audit and assurance, HR and finance, and improving links with adult mental health services;
- 5.11.4 important work has also begun at the corporate level to reduce historic organisational bureaucratic structures and processes, including to reduce the number of boards and approval mechanisms that slow down activity and cause frustration among staff;
- 5.11.5 there is an acceptance that the Council was slow to address capability issues across management in children's social care services with the first small tranche of strong managers only being appointed in late 2016 and early 2017. There has been greater urgency during the review period and there is now a new SMT, new heads of service, and more action taken across management tiers to secure better capacity and capability to support social workers. However, sustainability remains a concern as two new SMT members are on single year contracts, and four out of the five key Heads of Service are agency workers. To build confidence and the right environment for sustainable improvement, stability at these senior levels is critical;
- 5.11.6 although the Council took too long to engage partners in the core improvement work and in the Improvement Board, partners themselves have responded swiftly and effectively, contributing well to the development and early implementation of the Improvement Plan;
- 5.11.7 after a protracted period, a strong appointment has been made to the position of Chair of Barnet's Safeguarding Children Board. He has made a promising start, contributing to the Improvement Board and working with the

Director for Social Care and Education at Essex County Council, the DCS and SMT to begin to align the work of BSCB to maximise effort and impact on practice and children across the partnership.

- 5.12 This encouraging start indicates that the Council now more fully understands the extent of improvement required and is prepared to work with their Improvement Leadership Partner to increase pace, impact and sustainability. However, it is too early to judge the impact or effectiveness of the actions and intention listed above. It will therefore be key for the Council to:
- 5.12.1 ensure all the actions and intentions actions set out above are in train and that they are monitored closely to ensure they are having the necessary impact;
 - 5.12.2 ensure close monitoring of the implementation of the Improvement Plan to ensure that it is proceeding according to specified timescales;
 - 5.12.3 ensure that there is effective engagement with Essex as their Improvement Leadership Partner and that the impact and progress of the Partnership is monitored as part of the Improvement Plan;
 - 5.12.4 engage partners fully in the implementation of the Plan, ensuring clarity across agencies and Council divisions and directorates about roles and requirements;
 - 5.12.5 given the number of senior agency appointments, secure stability within the management of the service, taking advice from Essex;
 - 5.12.6 keep training, development and support for staff and partners under review to ensure that capability continues to be built and maintained;
 - 5.12.7 as part of the monitoring work of the Improvement Board, keep the resourcing of the Improvement Plan under review to ensure that it can be delivered effectively and sustained, increasing resource further if necessary; and,
 - 5.12.8 protect children's social care from cuts to its base budget in the medium term.

Use of performance information to drive improvement and understanding of services

- 5.13 Going forward, it is essential that effective systems are in place at every level to have a clear and accurate view of how services are performing for children and young people. At practice level, social workers, their managers and their senior managers need to use management and quality information more effectively for children. At senior management levels in the Council, SCB must be sighted on the quality and performance of services. At governance levels, members need to

understand the strengths and weaknesses of children's services and the implications of that for their decision-making. In relation to the BSCB, their work to scrutinise and support safeguarding across the partnership needs to be aligned to the improvement effort as set out in the Improvement Plan, and their deliberations need to be well informed and sighted on the relevant issues.

5.14 The Council has accepted the need to improve performance management, to increase their capacity and capability for analysing data and information, and to reduce the bureaucracy currently associated with its operation. However, even though an improved performance framework has been established for the Improvement Board, it is not yet being used effectively. There is some improvement in the usefulness of reports for the front line in some areas but progress in using and analysing performance information to drive improvement generally remains slow.

5.15 Better progress has been made, taking advice from Essex, on adopting more effective auditing processes within children's social care. There is recent evidence of audits now becoming more accurate. This will help auditing and quality assurance to become more useful to staff as a core part of their learning and development and encourage a better, more consistent understanding of what constitutes good practice with children.

5.16 In relation to this area of concern, and the findings of the review:

5.16.1 Essex, as Barnet's Improvement Leadership Partner:

- has established a case audit system based on the 'treble loop' principle to speed learning and consistency, with face to face and written feedback to Barnet's managers. As part of this, Essex has calibrated managers' audits leading to more accurate auditing as evidenced in the recent Ofsted monitoring visit;
- has introduced a performance data tool which allows for more straightforward scrutiny;
- is providing specific further advice on using performance management information effectively to monitor activity and secure impact;
- is working with SMT to improve their skills and focus on quality and impact, guiding them to ask the critical 'so what' questions to support their problem-solving around areas requiring rapid improvement; and,
- as well as providing ongoing evaluation and feedback to Barnet on progress, more formal three-monthly stocktakes have been organised with Heads of Service required to account for progress in their areas. The first of these is scheduled for early December 2017.

5.16.2 the Chief Executive has initiated an internal performance and governance review which has resulted in reducing layers of bureaucracy. From November 2017, he has established a monthly review of performance and delivery at SCB where the team will consider reports of progress against key organisational priorities. This is a change for SCB which previously focused more on transformation and change projects;

5.16.3 some additional capacity for supporting the monitoring of the Improvement Plan has been secured and is supporting improvements.

5.17 It is early days for the improvement of performance management in Barnet. However clear and encouraging the intentions, it will be key for the Council to:

5.17.1 ensure that the work with Essex is being successful in building skills in this area and, in particular, that the audit and quality assurance functions speed learning and development and secure a consistent understanding of expectations and practice standards;

5.17.2 ensure that the intended performance management systems are effectively implemented to drive and monitor improvement; that they are analytical and provide useful qualitative and quantitative information for the front line, managers, the Improvement Board, SCB, the BSCB and members;

5.17.3 ensure that systems are not overly bureaucratic so that they take attention and capacity away from the core job of improving outcomes for children.

Engagement and communications

5.18 The Council has accepted the need for improving engagement with staff in order to address the disconnect between senior management and the front line. It is encouraging to see how determined colleagues in Barnet are to improve engagement and communications with a range of action being taken.

5.19 This is, of course, as important to the recruitment and retention effort as it is to securing strong two-way understanding, effective lines of sight and a collegiate culture with everyone working towards common aims. As staff confidence in the improvement builds, Barnet will be seen as a safe and exciting place to work and recruitment and retention of high quality staff will become easier, bringing stability for children. While this is not yet evident across services in Barnet, early signs of this positive effect can be seen in the MASH where, thanks to the Operational Director, her Heads of Service and their teams, morale is higher and improvement efforts are beginning to show results.

5.20 Communication and engagement with partners is also key to building the necessary relationships and understanding to enable everyone to work together for children. The Council needs to bring to bear the full capacity of the partnership if progress to improve children's services is to be rapid and sustained. Engagement with partners has improved but will need continued efforts. Focused work with schools has increased, although their engagement is always more challenging, given the number of organisations concerned. Nevertheless, headteachers are working positively with the Council to contribute to the implementation of the Improvement Plan.

5.21 In relation to this area of concern, and the findings of the review:

- 5.21.1 Essex, as their Improvement Leadership Partner, is supporting and advising colleagues in Barnet on establishing and sustaining an effective approach to engagement and communications to secure strong two-way dialogue between front line staff, their managers and senior managers within the service;
 - 5.21.2 opportunities to engage have been increased, including holding a children's social care managers' development session headed up by the Chief Executive and DCS to begin to galvanise the team and secure a culture of shared endeavour;
 - 5.21.3 the Chief Executive, as well as the DCS, is making strenuous efforts to attend team meetings and other corporate colleagues are meeting with front line managers to listen to their perspectives;
 - 5.21.4 approaches to cascading information are being improved and the DCS's regular briefings are taking place fortnightly;
 - 5.21.5 a social worker survey is going out to staff in January 2018 and this will give the opportunity for staff to feed back on morale and cultural issues as well as the normal range of questions. A full staff survey is due to be conducted in April 2018;
 - 5.21.6 an Executive Headteacher is being seconded to support children's social care with their engagement of schools.
- 5.22 There is no doubt that the Council is making significant efforts to address the barriers to improvement in relation to engagement and communication. There is good recognition that strong engagement takes considerable time and effort and is an ongoing process. To secure impact, it will be key for the Council to:
- 5.22.1 ensure that the planned engagement and communications activity comprises a comprehensive engagement strategy, designed to build a positive, shared culture and to ensure that the Improvement Plan is understood by those who need to take or support action, including across the Council and partners;
 - 5.22.2 ensure that schools, in particular, are clear about what they are expected to do to support the improvement effort and that they have clear, responsive contact points within children's social care; and,
 - 5.22.3 ensure that when information is cascaded, it is received and understood.

Governance

- 5.23 This report has already made clear the commitment of Barnet's members to their children and young people and to the improvement of services designed to improve outcomes for them. The Leader has expressed his personal determination to put right the failures found in the inspection and the Lead Member and other senior

members are equally focused on the need to support, fuel and resource the improvement effort. The Leader of the Opposition has likewise been clear about the priority he and his group place on serving the most vulnerable children in the borough. This is particularly encouraging given the marginal nature of the borough. It brings confidence in the stability of Barnet going forward, irrespective of the outcome of the local government elections in May 2018. At that point, Barnet will still need to be focusing on and prioritising the significant improvement of its children's social care practice.

5.24 Some work has taken place to increase members' understanding of children's social care services and practice. The Leader and Lead Member, along with the Chief Executive, joined a recent 'Practice Week', observing audit and other sessions.

5.25 There is recognition of the need to address the governance issues arising during the review in order to ensure that members understand children's social care and are supporting its improvement across its Committees. The issues raised in Section 4 of this report are therefore being considered. In particular:

5.25.1 the CELS Committee is taking a report on safeguarding at every meeting;

5.25.2 the Cabinet Member for Children and Families in Essex is due to provide coaching and training for key members, including members of the CELS Committee, on corporate parenting;

5.25.3 more comprehensive member training is being developed for the new intake in May 2018;

5.25.4 it has been agreed that all the 'theme' Committees, including CELS, will receive quarterly performance reports, beginning in January 2018. This should help to ensure that any performance slippage does not fall between the remit of two or more Committees;

5.25.5 the Chief Executive and SCB have undertaken to prepare a review in relation to governance issues with options and proposals for the incoming administration to consider post May 2018;

5.25.6 the Chief Executive is considering the introduction of a quarterly 'Safeguarding Summit' involving the Leader, Lead Members for Children and Adults, the Chief Executive, DCS and DASS.

5.26 Notwithstanding the action above, if governance is fully to support the improvement of services for vulnerable children in Barnet, it will be key for the Council to ensure that:

5.26.1 any member training fully addresses the need for members to understand: children's social care practice and services; key issues within the service; the Council's and members' responsibilities in relation to corporate parenting and to safeguarding; and how effectively to support officers through robust scrutiny and monitoring of performance, children's outcomes

and the quality of practice;

- 5.26.2 attendance at mandatory elements of member training is effectively monitored and addressed;
- 5.26.3 the quality of any member training is evaluated;
- 5.26.4 in addition to member training, a programme is developed for relevant members in the new administration to gain strong insight into and understanding of children's social care practices and services and of the needs of the children involved;
- 5.26.5 there is sufficient, regular, opportunity for the Leader, with Chairs of all Committees, collectively to review progress in improving services and outcomes for vulnerable children and to ensure that their needs are prioritised;
- 5.26.6 the officer review of governance is completed by May 2018 for consideration by the incoming administration and should take account of the issues raised in paragraphs 4.17 to 4.25 of this report.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

- 6.1 The purpose of the review was to evaluate the corporate and governance capacity of the Council to make rapid and sustained improvements to their services for children in order to achieve the outcomes that children in Barnet deserve. That evaluation could then inform a recommendation to the Secretary of State as to whether there is sufficiently strong evidence to suggest that the long term sustainable improvement to children's social care can be achieved if operational service control stays with the London Borough of Barnet.
- 6.2 There is no doubt about the systemic failures that were found by Ofsted in Barnet. I have set out my view of the causes of the current failures and the action that I consider necessary to address those causes in order to secure sustained improvement for children, at pace.
- 6.3 Key to that improvement is strong leadership of the turn-around of services - leadership which can secure sustained improvement and focuses on:
- 6.3.1 developing and embedding a strongly child-focused culture, setting and securing consistent, high standards and expectations for practice across services;
 - 6.3.2 prioritising actions which will make a real difference to children's lives and outcomes, securing pace, momentum and clarity;
 - 6.3.3 engaging and galvanising staff, corporate colleagues and partners;
 - 6.3.4 developing strong, creative and cohesive teams, including at SMT level;
 - 6.3.5 acting quickly and decisively to deal with any blockages to improvement for children.
- 6.4 The evidence I have set out in this report indicates that the Council has taken responsibility for its failures. They have accepted the findings of both Ofsted and my review and have demonstrated their commitment and determination to take the necessary action to bring about long-term improvement. They have made an encouraging start in many areas to address the issues, including through committing additional resource on a recurring basis. They have accepted my advice and recommendations throughout the review period, and those of the Director for Social Care and Education at Essex County, in his capacity as Chair of the Improvement Board. Critically, they have accepted their need for greater experience and expertise in the leadership of turning around failing services as described in paragraph 6.3. This has led to their agreement of the need for a strengthened arrangement between Barnet and Essex County Council to provide them with the capacity and capability they need for sustainable improvement of children's services in Barnet, bringing extensive and consolidated experience of how to turn around failure and develop services rapidly.
- 6.5 In this Improvement Leadership Partner model, described earlier in the report, Barnet has agreed that the Executive Director, Social Care and Education in Essex, will report directly to Barnet's Chief Executive on the pace of progress and on any additional requirements to secure the necessary sustainable improvement. He will lead and direct the improvement programme in Barnet, working closely with the

children's SMT and the Council overall to ensure that the improvement effort is effective in securing impact for children; that it is resourced effectively; that the work of the Council overall is well focused; and that the capacity and capability of Barnet's team is enhanced to enable them, in due course, to continue the programme to ensure long-term sustainable improvement, at pace.

- 6.6 This model has good potential to succeed in Barnet, not only because of the experience of the Essex team, but also because of the improved strength of the leadership and management within children services in the borough. Barnet has now secured a larger core of committed leaders and managers within children's services who are child-focused and understand what high quality practice looks like. While there is an urgent need to secure the stability of the senior management in the service, these colleagues are working more effectively with dedicated and hard-working social workers on the front line. The focus and direction envisaged in the new Improvement Leadership Partner model should provide the required ingredients for success for children and young people in the borough.
- 6.7 However, the model will only succeed if senior leaders and managers engage well with the direction and coaching from the Essex team. This will support the acceleration of their own learning and expertise in order that they can build rapidly on their collective strengths and develop further the skills necessary to provide the long-term surety of improvement that children in Barnet deserve and require. Encouraging early signs show that this engagement is good, reflected in the outcome of Ofsted's first monitoring visit to the borough. Inspectors found that, while practice remains inadequate, early signs of progress are clear.
- 6.8 Equally, the model will require good engagement with Essex from the Leader, members, partners, the new Chair of the BSCB, and colleagues from across the Council, including the Chief Executive and SCB. Again, there are clear signs of good engagement with the model across the piece, including from the refreshed and now robust Improvement Board.
- 6.9 While there can be confidence in the model described for Barnet, it is prudent to look at alternative approaches in line with the terms of reference for the review. I have therefore considered a range of alternative governance and delivery arrangements to ascertain whether they would be more likely to achieve rapid and sustained improvement than leaving the services with the Council. There is no doubt that, in the right context, these models can provide a clear focus on children and young people where Councils cannot. I particularly considered the extent to which different models would:
- bring about improvement more quickly;
 - secure more likelihood of sustained improvement;
 - be more manageable to deliver within the Barnet context;
 - build on, rather than disrupt, the very early signs of improvement in Barnet, including to provide confidence and stability for staff who have experienced a significantly long period of churn and instability; and,
 - provide better value for money.

- 6.10 I considered whether a local authority delivery partnership with a successful local authority might be effective in relation to the criteria above. Such an authority could use its management team and key staff to run Barnet alongside or as part of its own services. However, given the appointment of a core of strong managers and the work already started with Essex, this model could duplicate or even undo much of what is already being achieved. The model agreed between Barnet and Essex achieves many of the strengths of this approach in any case, adding necessary expertise into the borough but with a focus on building Barnet's own skills so that they can sustain improvement. As such, this local authority delivery partnership approach could reduce momentum and, critically, would be unlikely to work as quickly or as effectively than Barnet working with Essex to build the skills of its own permanent team.
- 6.11 In relation to other Trust or social enterprise company arrangements, the Council statutorily retains accountability for children's services, even if they are not directly delivering those services. Given the work that the Council and partners are already doing with Essex, these models are likely to have a negative impact on the pace of improvement. In the time taken to get the Trust or company established, improvement should be well on track in Barnet. The establishment processes required are likely to take focus away from the improvement effort at a point where colleagues in Barnet are now working to deliver their Improvement Plan. These models would also be considerably more expensive to implement.
- 6.12 Members and senior officers in Barnet recognise the benefits that alternative delivery arrangements can bring, and Barnet has a history of introducing different approaches in a range of contexts. Their view, however, is that such arrangements are not appropriate or desirable for children's service in their current context as they will prove a distraction and a detraction from the improvement work already in hand.
- 6.13 On balance, my view is that the evidence points to Barnet having made an encouraging start to making the improvements required to ensure children in the borough are safeguarded. While Barnet's initial efforts did not have the desired impact, their work now, with the Essex team, is beginning to show the necessary signs of progress. On that basis, I have concluded that the best way forward for children in Barnet is for the Council to retain control of its services, operating with Essex as their Improvement Leadership Partner.
- 6.14 However, it is still early in the development and operation of this new model. It will be important for Essex and Barnet to keep progress under review to ensure their work together is having the intended impact. In his role as Chair of the Improvement Board, the Director for Social Care and Education at Essex County Council is well placed to report regularly to the DfE on progress and to raise an alert if he considers that pace of improvement is too slow or that engagement is not as required to ensure success. In addition, following full implementation of the model in six months, further external Commissioner advice should be sought on whether the model has been successfully implemented or if alternative arrangements have become necessary.
- 6.15 Currently, the model has been agreed between Barnet and Essex to run until September 2018, at which point Ofsted will have completed four monitoring visits.

They have agreed that the model should be reviewed before the end of the period with a view to extension if appropriate. This will be a key point to ensure that Barnet has the necessary capacity and capability to sustain any improvement and Commissioner advice may also be necessary at that point.

6.16 Any statutory direction to the Council should make clear the requirement on the London Borough of Barnet to engage fully with the Improvement Leadership Partner model and with the Chair of the Improvement Board in relation to his role in reporting progress to the DfE.

Recommendations

6.17 On the basis of the evidence set out in this report, I recommend that:

6.17.1 the London Borough of Barnet should retain its children's social care services on the basis that they:

- deliver on the intentions and actions set out in this report and in their Improvement Plan;
- work with Essex within the Improvement Leadership Partner model as set out in this report;

6.17.2 The Director for Social Care and Education at Essex County Council, in his capacity as the Chair of the London Borough of Barnet's Improvement Board, should report progress on a regular basis to the DfE;

6.17.3 Further external Commissioner advice should be sought on whether alternative arrangements are necessary after the model has been in operation for at least six months.

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