

**Report on progress
relating to the
improvement of
children's services in
the London Borough of
Bromley**

September 2017

1. Introduction and background

- 1.1. Bromley's services for children were inspected by Ofsted in April and May 2016. They were found to be inadequate across all reported categories and the inspection raised serious questions surrounding practice and leadership. I was appointed Commissioner for Children's Services in the London Borough of Bromley in June 2016 by the Secretary of State. In October 2016, a report was published setting out my findings of a three-month review considering the extent to which the Council had the leadership and management capacity and capability to drive forward the changes necessary to achieve the required standard for their children and young people. That report can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/bromley-childrens-services-report-to-the-secretary-of-state>
- 1.2. In that report, I set out the action required to remove barriers to making rapid and sustained improvements for children in Bromley as well as the action the Council had already taken to begin those improvements. I concluded that the early indications showed that the Council had taken full responsibility for the failures in their services; that they understood what was required to support staff, under new leadership, to make the required improvements; and that they had made an encouraging start in many areas to address the issues, including through committing additional resource on a recurring basis.
- 1.3. Key to that improvement was the effective leadership and management of children's services in Bromley. The Council had appointed an experienced, effective DCS, with a strong track record and established him as Deputy Chief Executive at the Council. My report concluded that, while this was critical to securing successful, rapid improvement, it would not in itself be sufficient. He would require ongoing support at corporate and governance levels to ensure that he could operate with authority, flexibility and focus.
- 1.4. Given that the Council's intentions were clear and positive, and that early action had been taken, I recommended that the best way forward for children in Bromley would be for the Council to retain control of its services. However, in order fully to be confident that the Council would sustain its encouraging start, I also recommended that there should be some continuing senior oversight which would bring confidence to staff and partners that the Council, with their support, could deliver on their intentions.
- 1.5. To that end, Ministers decided to appoint a Commissioner for a further six-month period. I was re-appointed to that role in December 2016. The terms of reference required me to:
 - 1.5.1. support and challenge senior members, corporate senior management and senior partners to work together to create the culture and leadership necessary to sustain improvements in children's services;

- 1.5.2. review the Council's leadership and management capacity and capability to drive forward the changes necessary to achieve the required standard;
 - 1.5.3. make a recommendation to the Secretary of State as to whether the Council has made sufficient progress to continue to retain control of its children's services or whether alternative delivery arrangements are the most effective way of securing and sustaining improvement, and if so, to recommend the form those alternative delivery arrangements should take.
- 1.6. During the course of the six months, I met often with the Deputy Chief Executive/DCS, the Chief Executive, the Leader and the portfolio holder. I continued to meet with senior and team managers and staff within children's social care; with partners, including from schools, health and the police; with the corporate leadership; and with other senior members from the Executive and scrutiny sides. In addition, I liaised and consulted with the new independent Chairs of both the Bromley Safeguarding Children's Board and the Children's Services Governance Improvement Board which had been established to oversee progress against the ambitious Improvement Plan. I attended partnership and other meetings to observe progress. The focus of my scrutiny was on those areas set out in my original report, which were highlighted as critical to securing rapid and sustained improvement for children in Bromley. Those areas comprised:
- 1.6.1. **Leadership and management** relating to (i) the appointment and support of a highly effective DCS and (ii) securing effective action to improve practice and outcomes and the capacity and capability to deliver;
 - 1.6.2. **Resourcing;**
 - 1.6.3. **Understanding strengths and weaknesses;**
 - 1.6.4. **Communication and engagement, and partnership working.**
- 1.7. This report sets out:
- 1.7.1. a summary of progress and further recommendations for Bromley in each of the areas above; and
 - 1.7.2. overall conclusions and recommendations.
- 1.8. Once again, I have been welcomed and supported extremely well in my task by everyone in Bromley, including staff and their managers, senior managers across the Council, the Leader, portfolio holder, independent Chairs, members and partners. Their openness and willingness to engage have been exemplary and ensured that I was able to assess progress effectively and to take an honest and transparent approach throughout. I am very grateful to all colleagues in Bromley and my particular thanks go once more to Gill Drury for the excellent logistical support she provided during the course of this further review period.

2. Progress in key areas

- 2.1. In addition to the oversight provided by a Commissioner, Bromley has continued to receive monitoring visits from Ofsted throughout the review period. Since December 2016, when the new Deputy Chief Executive took up his post, the Ofsted monitoring visits have recognised continuing progress being made for Bromley's children. The latest monitoring visit letter recognises '*momentum in the establishment of and embedding core standards and processes*'. Inspectors concluded that there are continuing improvements in practice and that increased capacity at social work and managerial level, aligned with more active engagement of partners, is a key contributor to the progress seen.
- 2.2. It has been important for my review, not only to be reassured that Ofsted is recognising improvements, but also for me to assess whether the conditions in Bromley are those which will ensure that these improvements can continue to be delivered, at pace, and that they are likely to be sustainable over time. The four areas covered in this report, as set out in paragraph 1.6 above, are those which are key to securing embedded, sustained improvement for children and young people in Bromley.

Leadership and management

- 2.3. At the time of the last review, it was clear that a lack of effective leadership and management at all levels was at the heart of the failure of Bromley's services for children. There was little vision evident for children, inconsistent practice and silo working, a lack of proactivity in the service and beyond, and a process driven culture with a lack of focus on the child. Both capability and capacity required attention, caseloads were dangerously high and management spans too wide.
- 2.4. The Council quickly committed to a range of action as set out in my October 2016 report. They recognised the need to make clearer their prioritisation of children and their ambition for improving outcomes. They also recognised the urgency of appointing an outstanding DCS who could lead practice improvement and play a wider role in bringing leadership and culture change across the Council and its work with partners. The decision was made to secure a permanent appointment of the right calibre and to establish the role as Deputy Chief Executive, thereby underlining its corporate importance. Pursuing a permanent appointment rather than having a period of interim management, until the Deputy Chief Executive/DCS took up his post in December 2016, was difficult for the Council's leadership. It inevitably caused an uncomfortable hiatus where little progress for children was made and the expectations of staff, members and partners were not met. However, the benefits of securing a strong permanent appointment, not least in sending an important message of confidence to children's social care staff, were judged to outweigh the shorter-term disadvantages.
- 2.5. While the appointment of the Deputy Chief Executive was central to achieving sustained improvement, it was not, in itself, sufficient. He would need corporate

and governance support to ensure that he was able to act with the necessary authority and flexibility to make the difference. He would also need to focus on the children and young people's agenda, despite his broader role. This was stipulated in the statutory Direction issued to Bromley Council in October 2016.

2.6. Over the last six months, progress in relation to leadership and management has been strong, with recommended areas for action addressed effectively. In particular:

- 2.6.1. the Deputy Chief Executive has brought strong practice leadership, instilling confidence in staff and partners alike, including through:
- communicating a compelling and clear vision for children in Bromley;
 - publishing a clear 'Roadmap to Excellence';
 - setting out required practice standards and ensuring these are adhered to, with stronger management oversight;
 - introducing comprehensive, bespoke, training for staff and for multi-agency groups;
 - introducing a 'triple-lock' system for key cases run by a team of external managers, securing immediate live audit for managers and their social workers;
 - establishing clear expectations that the child's needs must be central to all the services' work;
 - significantly changing the culture within services to energise staff and encourage proactive, child-focused practice;
 - instilling confidence in staff that promises will be delivered, thereby helping them to feel supported in their improvement efforts.
- 2.6.2. both capacity and capability have been robustly addressed:
- capability issues have been dealt with at every level within children's services, resulting in significant changes;
 - the Council's injection of resource has enabled a very strong, expanded, senior team to be recruited to support the Deputy Chief Executive, including a highly respected, experienced and child-focused Director of Children's Social Care. The number of Heads of Service (HoS) has been expanded, from four to seven, with the appointment of experienced and capable professionals, creating manageable spans, and allowing higher quality, direct work with social workers and team managers;
 - almost all this senior team are on permanent contracts, bringing confidence and stability to managers, social workers and partners;
 - senior managers are working considerably more closely with their teams. They are securing higher morale, fewer silos, greater oversight, and a stronger child-focused approach;
 - in order to deliver on the promise of lower caseloads, a significant increase in the number of social workers and team leaders is also being delivered, although progress on recruitment has been slower than desired. Turnover has been high as new practices are robustly implemented. A comprehensive recruitment strategy is in place, including fast-track processes, but the senior team is rightly ensuring

that only high quality social workers are accepted. Bromley's social workers continue to work extremely hard, with passion and determination, for their children and are now receiving the support they need to succeed. There is still more to do to achieve the levels of caseload which have been promised, but progress towards those goals is clear;

- 2.6.3. a better culture of learning from others' good practice has been established, with experience from strong Local Authorities being brought in to support improvement, including for the legal team, the establishment of a new CSE team with the police, the IRO service, and the quality assurance team;
- 2.6.4. the Deputy Chief Executive and his team have established an extensive structure for staff engagement, ensuring they are closely in touch with the front line and with partners;
- 2.6.5. the data and auditing activity are showing clear signs of improvement, including in terms of reduced drift and delay, better assessments, including risk assessments, improved planning, improved quality of direct work with children, and, critically, better outcomes for those children;
- 2.6.6. in addition to his practice leadership, the Deputy Chief Executive has also established a strong corporate presence, ensuring that corporate colleagues are sighted on children's issues and understand how they can support the improvement effort. Senior managers from across the Council are supporting the Deputy Chief Executive and his team effectively, including in relation to HR issues and recruitment, finances, legal services and commissioning;
- 2.6.7. in terms of governance leadership and support, the Leader has reviewed the portfolio structure in the Council and, from January 2017, a single portfolio holder now carries responsibility for children and young people, thereby raising its profile further within the Council;
- 2.6.8. the Leader, portfolio holder and Chief Executive are giving the Deputy Chief Executive and his team good support and ensuring that he has the authority and flexibility to secure the necessary improvement for Bromley's children. The Deputy Chief Executive is able to have challenging conversations, as required, with the Leader, portfolio holder and senior members and this is encouraging a healthier culture and stronger relationships within the Council;
- 2.6.9. the Leader and senior members are now clearly prioritising children within the borough. The Leader has explicitly championed children and expressed his ambition for them. He, the portfolio holder and the rest of the Executive have ensured that the improvement effort has their full support, including through the provision of additional resources. Members are more engaged in children's services, receiving regular briefings from the Deputy Chief Executive on progress. Senior members are more aware of their responsibilities and of the everyday business of children's social care, including participating in a 'practice week' run by the Quality Improvement Service. While the Deputy Chief Executive has ensured that a full member training programme has been established, the monitoring of attendance at the training events was not robust and

numbers appear to be low. Further member training is planned for which attendance monitoring will need to be improved.

- 2.6.10. it has been agreed that the structure of the scrutiny side of the administration will be changed from the beginning of the new civic year in May 2017. There will be a single scrutiny committee covering children and young people's matters;
- 2.6.11. a new independent Chair of the Bromley Safeguarding Children Board (BSCB) has been appointed who brings with him the experience of chairing a Safeguarding Board judged by Ofsted to be outstanding. He is working closely with the Deputy Chief Executive, partners, young people and others to ensure that the Board's work is fully aligned to the Improvement Plan and that it adds value to children in the borough.
- 2.6.12. a Children's Service Governance Improvement Board was established following the failed inspection in 2016 to oversee the development, implementation and monitoring of the Improvement Plan. An independent chair was brought in once the Improvement Plan had been submitted to Ofsted. The Board is well attended by senior representatives of partners, senior corporate managers, the Leader, portfolio holder and scrutiny Chair as well as other Council senior managers. The independent Chair is robust and challenging as well as supportive. Her expertise is ensuring a strong focus on the Plan and on the children it serves. Her contribution is helping to ensure that the improvement effort maintains pace and momentum throughout the Council and the borough.

2.7. In summary, since the appointment of the Deputy Chief Executive/DCS, the pace of progress has quickened significantly. The strength of the new leadership and management in children's services is bringing about good, steady improvements in the services which serve Bromley's vulnerable children and young people, and there is a good understanding of what more needs to be done to improve further and to ensure sustainability. The Deputy Chief Executive and his team are being well supported by corporate colleagues and by the Leader, portfolio holder and members. The independent Chairs of the Improvement Board and the BSCB are providing strong challenge and support, bringing high expectations, and embedding more robust accountability structures.

2.8. Clearly, however, there is still more to do across services. The positive action set out above needs to continue to secure embedded, sustained improvement. *It is also important that:*

2.8.1. attendance at future member training programmes relating to the safeguarding of children and corporate parenting is monitored and action taken to ensure full participation.

2.8.2. the Leader, portfolio holder and Chief Executive continue to ensure that the Deputy Chief Executive is able to continue to act with authority and flexibility to bring about and sustain improvement.

Resourcing

- 2.9. At the time of the last review, the Council had already understood the need to support the implementation of the Improvement Plan through increasing resource. This was particularly to secure greater capacity for effective management oversight and urgently to reduce caseloads. Early commitments were made regarding this extra resource and an initial tranche agreed by the Executive.
- 2.10. While, at around the time of the inspection in 2016, children's services were operating within their budgets, action since the inspection had led to a significant in-year pressure in the placements budget. It was important that this pressure was taken into account as part of the ongoing budget setting for children's services.
- 2.11. Whatever the reality about resourcing children's services in Bromley, there was considerable lack of confidence among staff and partners at the time of the last review about members' commitment to prioritising children in the Council's overall budget. In addition, there was some concern about whether senior officers had sufficient delegated authority within the scheme of delegation to be able to work effectively, at pace, to bring about improvements.
- 2.12. Over the last six months, the Council has continued to invest in their children's services, making clear the priority they now give to their most vulnerable children. In particular:
- 2.12.1. £4.4m additional spend has been agreed as ongoing resource for the children's budget, covering both the placement budget pressure and the resource required to increase capacity across the service. This spend is included in the Council's base budget and the financial forecast;
 - 2.12.2. in addition, the Leader recognised the need for capacity to be increased at a quicker pace. With member support, he ensured that £1.5m was agreed as a one-off payment, for the two financial years 2017-2019, to facilitate social worker recruitment and a speedier reduction of caseloads;
 - 2.12.3. as well as the resource above, members agreed an additional sum to equip social workers immediately with laptops and mobile phones to facilitate more effective and secure remote working when required. The impact of this was significant and helped to ensure that social workers understood that they were being supported to make the necessary improvements in their practice;
 - 2.12.4. the independent Chair of the Children's Services Governance Improvement Board is ensuring that, as part of the Board's work to monitor the effective implementation of the Improvement Plan, it looks closely at the resource implications to secure effective delivery of the Plan;
 - 2.12.5. the Deputy Chief Executive and the Director of Finance have considered the Council's scheme of delegation and have concluded that it provides the necessary flexibility and financial authority for the Deputy Chief

Executive to act quickly as required to secure improvements. They have committed to keeping the scheme under review;

2.12.6. some efforts have been made to communicate to partners and staff the significant financial investment that members have committed to the children's budget. There remains more to do in this area to ensure these key messages are being heard and understood.

2.13. In summary, the investment the Council is making to support the improvement effort is clear. *It is important that:*

2.13.1. the resourcing of the Improvement Plan continues to be kept under review to ensure that it can be delivered effectively;

2.13.2. efforts continue to secure effective communication to staff and partners about the Council's ongoing financial commitment to improving its services for children and young people.

Understanding Strengths and Weaknesses

2.14. *At the time of the last review,* it was clear that the result of the inspection came as a surprise to almost all colleagues in Bromley, including the previous senior managers within children's services. At Directorate and corporate levels, analysis of quality, performance and risk was weak and performance information was not used by front line staff or their managers. Senior officer meetings within children's services and corporately were not considered to be effective at driving improvement. There was little effort to create strong 'lines of sight' to the front line so that senior managers and members understood the concerns of staff, partners and the children themselves. It was widely accepted that the IT system used for children's social care was unfit for purpose and a commitment was made to replace it with a system that enabled social workers to record and use information more easily and to greater effect for their children.

2.15. At member level, for both portfolio holders and scrutiny committees, information about performance was not being brought forward nor examined in ways that allowed effective analysis of performance. The BSCB did not have agendas, information or systems which necessarily gave them sufficient insight into the service.

2.16. The Chief Executive had committed to reviewing and improving performance and risk management at corporate and governance levels and was committed to ensuring that his Corporate Leadership Team (CLT), consisting of 14 senior managers across the Council, became effective at providing collective leadership and management across the Council. The Leader had committed to reviewing the portfolio and scrutiny structures within the Council to secure better focus and priority for children and young people's services and outcomes.

2.17. Over the last six months, work has continued in relation to the use of performance information. In particular:

- 2.17.1. within children's services, the Deputy Chief Executive, Director of Children's Social Care and their senior team have significantly improved performance and risk management and the use of information about quality, including:
- ensuring that the right performance information is available for review by senior managers, team managers and social workers so that a more accurate understanding is gained of progress in key areas;
 - setting expectations and practice standards around the use of information about performance and quality so that social workers and their managers on the front line know that they are required to use it to guide practice and to track cases, including to avoid delay and drift for children;
 - establishing a programmed weekly senior meeting to review particular aspects of the Improvement Plan, including performance, risk analysis and prioritisation, feeding into the main Children's Services Governance Improvement Board;
 - significantly improving the auditing of cases, including monthly risk-based thematic auditing, the results of which are being more systematically fed back to staff, including through the Quality Improvement Team holding regular 'getting to good' seminar sessions designed to share and disseminate good practice found in the audit activity;
 - enabling more effective information sharing, including about improvement strategies, through regular Children's Social Care Managers' Forums;
 - using the 'triple-lock' system to support rapid improvement and learning on the front line. This involves independent managers reviewing 'live cases' to quality assure decision making and provide immediate feedback to front line staff with auditors monitoring themes, co-ordinating the benchmarking of practice and discussing the programme of learning arising from trends and patterns found;
 - securing more supportive and responsive management oversight in order to achieve greater impact for children, including by using simple devices such as co-locating Heads of Service with their teams;
 - establishing an extensive programme for the Deputy Chief Executive and his team to maintain a 'line of sight' with the front line, including staff engagement sessions, briefings, a monthly staff surgery and a new Social Work Practice Advisory Group, comprising social workers from across the service, which meets monthly;
- 2.17.2. some progress has been made in relation to performance and risk management at the corporate level but it remains underdeveloped and in need of improvement. Some external expertise is being used to help improve risk management but progress is slow. Both performance and risk management are recognised as issues to be addressed and a

decision has been made that the good practice now more evident in children's services will be spread more widely under the oversight of the Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Finance.

- 2.17.3. the CLT is more collegiate and members of the team recognise the importance of their collective leadership and management role, including to mitigate against any further corporate failure. As with performance management, however, more needs to be done to ensure this large team operates effectively to embed change across the organisation. A smaller Chief Executive/Executive Directors' group is now meeting more regularly and this group has the potential to drive change and improvement corporately alongside a strong CLT;
 - 2.17.4. the Cabinet receives a monthly performance report from the Deputy Chief Executive, providing an objective appraisal of progress. Their monitoring of corporate performance and risk remains underdeveloped and will need to be considered as part of the work to improve corporate performance and risk management. A councillor has been identified by the Leader to support officers in this area;
 - 2.17.5. there is a recognition that there is still a need for more analysis to feed into effective and intelligent performance management, particularly corporately but also in children's services to secure maximum impact. Recruitment is in train for an Assistant Director of Strategy, Performance and Business Support to fill this important role;
 - 2.17.6. while the structure of scrutiny committees has been reviewed and a single children and young people's committee established, there remains work to be done to ensure that the scrutiny itself is robust and effective. This will help to give confidence that members are fully sighted on key issues, without increasing bureaucracy and burden. A revised good practice guide is planned but further training is likely to be required to support members in this role;
 - 2.17.7. work to introduce a new IT system for children's social care has progressed but the Deputy Chief Executive has decided its implementation will need to be delayed until it can be installed with confidence that it is effectively designed and fully fit for purpose. Implementation is now scheduled for November 2017;
 - 2.17.8. the new Chair of the BSCB is developing a more analytical and intelligence-led approach to the use of data across the partnership, including to inform the Board's training needs assessment. This work is now aligned to the Improvement Plan and evidence is being sought to ensure it is having the desired impact at the front-line, including through a new Community Engagement sub-group of the Board which includes children and parents from key target groups. The Board has also recruited an external auditor to undertake its programme of multi-agency audits.
 - 2.17.9. the robustly chaired Children's Services Governance Improvement Board regularly monitors performance against the Improvement Plan.
- 2.18. In summary, there is now more effective use of information about quality, and improved performance and risk management, within children's services. This is

being used to inform sustained improvement for children. More analytical capacity will secure an even stronger, intelligence-led approach which would increase impact further. The externally chaired Boards are sighted on data and quality information and are using it to provide robust challenge and support. Performance and risk management at corporate and governance levels are not yet fully effective and, at governance level, there remains a need to strengthen scrutiny. *It is important that:*

2.18.1. work is prioritised to improve corporate performance and risk management in order to ensure senior leaders and managers, and members are well sighted on key areas of Council business;

2.18.2. training and development are provided for members involved in scrutiny to ensure good scrutiny practice is effective and embedded, without increasing bureaucracy or burden;

2.18.3. given the delay to the implementation of the new IT system for children's social care, practice is kept under review to ensure that interim 'work-arounds' to the current system are developed as required.

Communication, engagement and partnership working

- 2.19. *At the time of the last review*, there were very poor relationships between the Council and its key partners with many partners expressing a lack of trust in the Council. Partners felt their professional advice was ignored by members and communication was poor, particularly with schools. This lack of trust and understanding between partners was a clear barrier to improvement. There was no formal children's partnership structure within the borough that could forge productive relationships around safeguarding or other children's issues. In common with staff, many partners felt the Council lacked both ambition and vision for children in the borough and that children were not a priority for members.
- 2.20. Partners and the Council recognised that they would need to work together if sustained improvement for Bromley's children and young people was to be delivered. Partners understood that they had to play their part to improve relationships and fulfil their safeguarding responsibilities. The Children's Services Governance Improvement Board was expanded to include all key partners and better engagement began to be evident.
- 2.21. Internally, communication and engagement were also weak, with staff expressing concern at members' lack of understanding of their work and their corporate parenting responsibilities, in particular. While there may, in some respects have been a gap between perceptions and reality, it was accepted that significant work was required to change those perceptions. The Council developed and began to communicate a new ambition for children in the borough; required all reports to include a paragraph outlining implications for vulnerable children and adults;

refreshed the operation and focus of the Borough Officers Strategic Partnership Forum, with the Leader personally taking the Chair; and committed to producing a communication strategy as part of the Improvement Plan. It was recognised, however, that it is challenging to get strong engagement and to communicate key messages to staff and partners effectively. It takes considerable time and effort and is an ongoing process.

2.22. Over the last six months, the Council has made good efforts to address the barriers to improvement in relation to communication and engagement and partnership working. In particular:

2.22.1. the Deputy Chief Executive has:

- set out a clear, compelling vision for children and young people in the borough which is widely appreciated amongst staff and partners alike;
- introduced a comprehensive approach to producing regular briefings and circulars for staff and partners, as well as for members;
- established a rolling programme of multi-agency partnership events covering different aspects of safeguarding, including the launch of a revised and updated Threshold Document. These events have been well attended;
- met regularly with senior colleagues from the Police, health and schools to discuss practice issues and concerns;
- established an extensive engagement programme for children's social care staff and their managers, to secure both strong engagement and clear lines of sight, as set out earlier in this report;
- given each school a designated safeguarding lead drawn from his senior team;
- produced and circulated a comprehensive Resource Directory so that all partners know who can help with different issues;
- with his Director of Children's Social Care, continued to work to improve relationships and understanding with schools. While impact at the front line has been slower to manifest itself to schools, and trust is not yet secure, there are some signs of progress and confidence is building;
- with his senior team, set a clear expectation for children's social care staff that engagement with partners and wider stakeholders needs to be proactive, responsive and timely. This will take time to be comprehensively embedded and should improve as caseloads reach the targeted level;
- established an understanding of the need for partners to fulfil their responsibilities for safeguarding children and securing improved outcomes, providing both challenge and support as required;
- established, through this range of activity, significant confidence, with staff and right across the partnership, in his ability and determination to improve outcomes for children and young people in Bromley;

2.22.2. some strong work is evident from partners, including the College's contribution for care leavers, the Police's involvement in establishing the

CSE team, and health's involvement in joint planning and funding through the placements panel. There is potential for more joint working with health, including through joint appointments, where that will further the interests of children. All partners need to continue to work proactively to fulfil their responsibilities to improve the safeguarding of children in Bromley, including by ensuring that they play their part in embedding strong and honest relationships with the Council and across the children's partnership;

- 2.22.3. a new partnership governance structure is being established for the long term with a Children's Executive Board, comprising senior representatives of all partners in the children's economy, at its heart. The Board has had its first meeting and there is a commitment to produce a Children and Young People's Plan to help bring focus to the partnership's work. There remains a need to clarify the partnership architecture to ensure all understand the relationships between groups and their remits, including the new Board, the BSCB and its new sub-groups, other multi-agency partnership groups, and the Children's Services Governance Improvement Board, while it is in operation;
- 2.22.4. the BSCB is playing a full role in improving engagement and is working to ensure that all involved understand their safeguarding responsibilities;
- 2.22.5. the Improvement Board continues to monitor the communications plan and, while there is no doubt that communication has improved significantly, there is still the need to ensure that the key messages sent out in briefings and circulars are heard and understood by their intended audiences in order to secure impact;
- 2.22.6. corporately, and at governance levels, there is much improved engagement as described earlier in this report. The Leader and portfolio holder are taking opportunities to express their vision and prioritisation of children and have a good understanding of their corporate parenting responsibilities. The introduction of a Council apprenticeship scheme for care leavers underlines their commitment;
- 2.22.7. the Leader continues to chair the senior Borough Officers Strategic Partnership Forum and there is some recognition that this is improving relationships and partnership working.

2.23. In summary, considerable effort is being made to engage staff and partners in the collective endeavour to safeguard children and young people in Bromley. There is good recognition that improvement for children requires safeguarding to be everybody's business and everybody's responsibility. Nevertheless, trust is not yet fully established between all partners and there is a need for continuing effort and vigilance to secure the impact that the children deserve. *It is important that:*

2.23.1. engagement with schools continues to be a particular focus to ensure that they have full confidence in the improvement being forged and that they, in turn, fully understand and fulfil their responsibilities to safeguard more vulnerable children and secure strong outcomes for them;

2.23.2. all partners continue to play their part in the improvement effort;

2.23.3. work continues to clarify the children's partnership governance structure, particularly to ensure that relationships between multi-agency groups are understood, that their terms of reference do not duplicate effort and that the overall burden of arrangements is proportionate and manageable;

2.23.4. checks are used, as required, to ensure that communications are heard and understood to achieve their intended purpose.

3. Conclusions and recommendations

- 3.1. While there is still much to do, and after a hiatus before the appointment of the Deputy Chief Executive, it is clear that good progress, at pace, is now being made to secure improvement for vulnerable children and young people in Bromley. The purpose of this further period of review was to evaluate the Council's leadership and management capacity and capability to drive forward those improvements on a sustained basis.
- 3.2. The new leadership of children's services at the Council is now strong and working well to achieve the necessary impact and to implement the structures necessary for ongoing improvement. There is clear evidence that they are receiving support from the Chief Executive and the Corporate Leadership Team. The Leader, portfolio holder, Cabinet members and backbenchers involved in scrutiny are also supporting the Deputy Chief Executive and his team effectively and are considerably more sighted on safeguarding issues in the borough than previously. They have engaged well with both my reviews, including with the difficult messages and recommendations made.
- 3.3. The evidence therefore points strongly to a recommendation for the Council to retain its services for children. Nevertheless, there remains more to be done to secure the further improvements necessary for Bromley's children. It is therefore prudent to consider the risks of a decision to leave services with the Council, not least so that mitigating factors can be identified. These risks include 'slip back', with a reduction of focus and support from members post-inspection or post-election, including in relation to resources; the potential lack of strategic planning for a transition to more 'normal' operation post-inspection, ie. without the triple lock team or the rigour of the Improvement Board; a reversion to a culture which is perceived not to welcome challenge or value partners; the loss of key personnel; any reduction in the authority and flexibility given to the Deputy Chief Executive to operate effectively; and lack of progress in improving corporate performance management and scrutiny. Some of these risks would be applicable whatever form of governance was in place.
- 3.4. A range of protective, mitigating factors are already in place in relation to these risks. These include: the strength and depth of the senior team in children's

social care and the fact that they are almost all permanent appointments, committed to Bromley and its children; the fact that the additional resource for children and young people has been put into the base budget and the financial forecast – while forecasting is done on a three year basis, the commitment for this additional resource to continue beyond 2020/21 has been explicitly stated; the experience of failure in such a critically important area has been bruising for the Council at both member at officer level – they are strongly motivated to equip themselves with the capacity and capability to avoid further failure and have, in the last six months, shown themselves able to respond effectively and support key officers; robust practice structures are in place, including a range of panels and more effective audit systems; strong support is evident from key members, including both the Leader and the portfolio holder; partnership structures are being established to embed multi-agency working; two strong independent chairs of the Improvement Board and the BSCB are providing robust oversight and challenge and the Improvement Board understands the need to plan strategically for the future when it is no longer required; additional analytical capacity is being put in place and the Deputy Chief Executive is well placed to oversee the development a stronger approach to corporate performance management.

- 3.5. These factors and the evidence gained through my review brings confidence that the Council has made sufficient progress to continue to retain control of its children's services. Momentum is established and morale is high within the service. A change of control at this point is likely to disrupt and delay the improvements being made.
- 3.6. The current statutory Direction to the London Borough of Bromley includes a requirement on the Council to ensure that the Deputy Chief Executive's focus is directed exclusively towards improved delivery of children's social care functions until agreed otherwise by the Secretary of State. This was a critical factor in ensuring that, while he was appointed to a broader role, the Deputy Chief Executive could give his full attention to improving these services.
- 3.7. During the next phase, until the full re-inspection of Bromley's services, and beyond, the Deputy Chief Executive has committed to continuing to focus his attention and time on improving children's social care in the borough, including through continuing to take day to day responsibility for the services. I am confident that progress has reached a stage where an external Direction is no longer required to ensure that his priority remains on leading children's services and the improvement of the lives and life chances of Bromley's children. The progress made and structures and personnel in place bring confidence that it is safe to allow the Deputy Chief Executive some flexibility to grow in his role and for him to decide, with the Leader and Chief Executive, whether and when he can take on broader leadership functions. Such functions will be those that also benefit the embedding of progress within children's social care, including, for example, supporting the Chief Executive in introducing stronger performance management in the wider Council and supporting the effective working of the Corporate Leadership Team.

- 3.8. Confidence to remove this aspect of the direction can be taken, not only from the Deputy Chief Executive continuing to take the day to day responsibility for children's social care and its improvement, but also from the strength of his new senior team. As indicated earlier in this report, that team is led by a robust, highly skilled and experienced Director of Children's Social Care. The seven Heads of Service comprising the team are themselves strong, experienced professionals. The scrutiny and challenge now established through the independent Chairs of the BSCB and the Improvement Board also give confidence that the improvement structures and processes now in place will continue to be kept under review to ensure that the Deputy Chief Executive, his team, members, the CLT and the partnership keep their focus on securing the best outcomes for Bromley's children. Improvement for children will also continue to be subjected to external monitoring from Ofsted which will give reassurance that the pace of progress is being maintained.

Recommendations

- 3.9. Based on the evidence set out in this report, I recommend that:

- 3.9.1. *the London Borough of Bromley should retain control of its children's services;***
- 3.9.2. *the direction to ensure that the Deputy Chief Executive's focus is directed exclusively towards improved delivery of children's social care functions be removed.***

Frankie Sulke CBE

Commissioner for Children in the London Borough of Bromley

May 2017

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