

# Getting to the heart of it..

Transforming services for children in Bexley

*“These compelling stories connect the head and the heart. They show what we’ve learnt and how we’ve made a difference on our six-year journey.”*

**Councillor Teresa O’Neill, OBE** — Leader of Bexley Council

Curated by **Jacky Tiotto** and **Dawn Reeves**

CREATING  
A SAFE SPACE

TOGETHER

OUR SAFE  
SPACE

SOMETHING  
DIFFERENT!

This is  
BRAVE  
+ this is  
DIFFICULT

BLOG

THOUGHTS OF  
THE WEEK...

MAKING A DIFFERENCE  
TO FAMILIES

REAL SENSE  
OF CALM +  
PRIDE

FEEL  
WE ARE  
CHANGING

Signs  
EMBEDDED

"TOGETHER  
WE ARE STRONGER"



IF YOU  
CAN DREAM  
IT, YOU CAN  
ACHIEVE IT!

Yes we  
CAN

keep  
going

SUPPORT  
PARENTS



It's about  
CRITICAL  
THINKING +  
MAKING TRICKY  
DECISIONS!

FOCUSING ON  
ONE PATH v. ANOTHER:



Show the impact  
on ME + your  
workings out!

& have parallel plans  
+ accessible fridge friendly  
CARE PLAN!

KEVIN  
TOP T

HELP ME  
TALK TO  
SHARE INFO

Other's perspective

consultant for

social

I was in the dark  
at the start  
like a ghost  
in the room!

I didn't know  
about the processes  
+ services available  
+ I wasn't consulted.



A PICTURE OF  
MY SON

I was always TOLD what to do  
it wasn't collaborative

It was always  
MUM, MUM, MUM -  
not the father's perspective



What's YOUR  
opinion

Wow, you've  
never asked me!



Wow, you want  
a STATEMENT  
from me!? I'm  
African + I love  
COOK FOR MY

PHEW it's  
over...

it doesn't cost much  
to CHANGE THE CULTURE

# Getting to the heart of it..♥

Transforming services for children in Bexley

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## FOREWORD

I'm incredibly proud of the work we've done to transform services for our residents. It's important to take the time to celebrate our achievements and reflect on the journey we've been on.

So I'm delighted to be contributing a foreword to this book. It highlights the work we do in providing children's services to make sure our most vulnerable children and young people have the best support we can provide.

In 2018, after six years of transformation, Ofsted judged our Children's Services to be outstanding. This collection of short stories tells you about our journey. They are about what we did and why. They engage the head and the heart.

They come from the people who work closely with children and young people in the most challenging of circumstances. They also come from the children and young people themselves. Their voices are heard less often but if we listen, they can tell us what we're getting right and what we need to improve.

The stories that follow help to show us how we overcome challenges and create a brighter future for our children, young people and their families.

I would like to thank everyone who has contributed to the book. I hope you enjoy reading it and learn from it.

**Councillor Teresa O'Neill, OBE**

Leader of the London Borough of Bexley

## INTRODUCTION

In July 2018, Ofsted rated services for children and their families as outstanding. It represented a significant step forward, a magical moment in our continuing journey of improvement. We were delighted.

A strong ethos permeates our work; we do the right thing for children by keeping families together, where it's safe to do so, and Ofsted recognised this. The inspectors saw that we had “created a successful approach, that works effectively and wholeheartedly to achieve the best outcomes for children and young people.”

Our approach, the vision and practice, are underpinned by strong caring connections between our children, families, practitioners, managers, politicians and the council more widely. It's a head and heart thing or - more officially - an accountability and relationships package.

We want to share insights from the improvements we've made and try to draw out the learning from our practice and we want to do that in a different, engaging way - a way that reflects how we do things here. We've put people and relationships at the heart of our work, our thinking and planning. We hope that, through the personal stories of leaders, managers, practitioners, partners, looked after children and young adults leaving our care, readers will understand better what it feels like to practice here and how we are trying to work alongside families who need some help and support.

### **Why a book of stories?**

Personal stories are important. They invite us to walk in the shoes of others, they help us make sense of the world around us and the situations we – and the children and families we serve in our communities – find ourselves in. We hope to show the tough realities, get under the skin and demonstrate what our practice means to children and families we support and those who work in Bexley. The Ofsted report noted that nurturing conditions enabled staff to feel valued and to do their best work. Our invitation to ‘our system’ to tell stories of improvement illustrates this far better than a traditional case study approach.

The stories represent many diverse perspectives but they are also clearly part of the Bexley culture. They illustrate wider universal messages about the air we breathe, our environment, our hive mind and our collective agency.

We are really pleased the collection includes stories from some of our looked after children, young adults leaving our care, foster families and partners, as well as practitioners at all levels and across many corporate teams and the councillors who provide such committed leadership. The stories show the pride we take in our work and the kindness that we try to use as a strong foundation in practice. The story format also allows people to show their skills, experience and creativity in a compelling and accessible way.

### **Who is the book for?**

Although the book is primarily designed to share our learning with other local authorities and agencies working with children’s services, the process of generating the stories, through a series of workshops and reflective conversations, has also been incredibly useful for us in



Bexley. Internally, we are good at celebrating success and make a priority of drawing out our own learning but we rarely capture it in such an inspiring way. At the same time we're ambitious for our children and we are not taking our foot off the pedal so many of the stories point to further developments.

In an age of uncertainty, financial constraints and too often negative media about local authorities and children's services in particular, it is vital that the positive aspects of what we do are equally heard and understood. The book includes stories that illustrate the brilliant work being done on a daily basis by good people working in a difficult environment. Our work makes a demonstrable impact. We hope the stories inspire you as they continue to inspire us.

### **How to use this book**

The stories in this book have been divided into six key themes:

- Relationships
- Leadership
- Learning
- Partnership
- Working environment
- Vision

Each chapter has a range of stories and a summary of what we think matters. The chapters end with a story from someone we are helping and supporting to find their own life solutions, to keep our focus on "what life is like for me."

For many working in children's services, the practices described may be familiar. Four years ago, we adopted the "Signs of Safety" framework for practice. The approach is well known internationally. What readers will see are stories of how to influence and lead a system root and branch, what practice looks like in one-to-one situations and the outcomes we've achieved.

The final section at the back of the book will provide you with some reflection tools. We hope readers, individuals and teams will take the opportunity to start telling and sharing their stories.

The book will be used to support children's services in local councils, local councillors leading and working with children's services and the many other indispensable partner agencies. It can:

- Support the transformation of children's services everywhere – inspiring and embedding new practice and new relationships
- Help individuals, teams and managers to identify and make improvements in their work
- Induct new members of staff and councillors working with children's services
- Support reflective practice and to help with for training courses

It will be a free ebook available to all – at [www.sharedpress.co.uk/books](http://www.sharedpress.co.uk/books)

All the stories in this book are true but some are anonymous and in some we've changed details to protect the identities of those involved.

We hope that these stories are a source of inspiration and a reminder of the bold and fantastic people that work in children's services at the London Borough of Bexley. Together we are at our best. The families and children in whose lives we are privileged to be deserve this and more.

**Jacky Tiotto**

Director of Children's Services

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to everyone who was part of producing this book; the colleagues from across the service who encouraged and supported others to write, everyone who came to workshops and to the staff and young people and staff at Positive Futures.

Thanks, too, to Jemma Goode and the Bexley comms and design teams for their help. Thanks to Dawn Reeves and Fran Collingham for additional editorial support and James Warren for design support.



# Relationships

*A commitment in practice from social workers and managers, which holds relationships at its core. Our practitioners believe that it is only through trusting relationships between families and themselves that change is possible. We have used 'Signs of Safety' as a practice model to enhance this focus on respectful work where families are supported to identify the best solutions to their difficulties and to follow safety plans that they develop within their family networks.*

## What matters...

We take care of ourselves in order to care for others

– *it makes personal change possible*

We create a container; family and professionals together

– *it's how we keep children safe*

We keep talking through the tough times

– *it's not just about being kind – it's about our accountability for children's safety and welfare*

We never under-estimate how tough the lives of children and young people can be

– *it's about perseverance*

We are authentic and human, even when it feels risky

– *it's about trusting each other so that we can think and reason together – it's a 'just culture'*

We don't know how each other's stories will end

– *it's a shared journey*

We start with relationships, we're accountable to children and families

– *it's at the heart of our practice*

## The new story

I'm sitting on my bed looking at photos. In the light of a warm summer sunset the face of Brisia looks back at me from the pictures. She's a 13 year old Mexican young woman I've worked with for the last year. It's been an interesting journey, along a road with many twists and turns.

It's involved her running away (a lot!) with me literally chasing after her on occasion, school exclusion, negative and exploitative friendships, police and courts, middle of the night moves (including to secure accommodation) and a whole lot of worry, frustration and anger (for both of us). I love her determination and defiance, but it's not been an easy relationship. We've struggled to understand each other – and not just in the sense that we speak different languages.

When she at last stopped running, we found ourselves at a crossroads. The road home to live with mum and dad was closed – not safe to travel down. In one direction she could stay in the UK, near her parents and younger sisters, but in long-term residential and with a foster family. Or she could take another path and fly thousands of miles to live with the grandparents who raised her until she was eight years old, but away from her family here.

Which way to go? She couldn't decide – changing her mind daily. My manager helped me with a mapping exercise – looking ahead at what lay ahead down each of those roads for Brisia. We make the decision that is too big for her to make alone – she will go.



And so here I am, creating a memory book and writing a goodbye letter. Trying to piece together the story – hers and ours – and find some way of ending it. I balance the memory book on my growing pregnancy bump; the bump that means I won't be the one to complete this journey with her. I won't be there for her last-minute panic in airport security, I won't be there for her tearful reunion with her grandparents.

I won't see her finally reach home. But if I can create this book, if I can find the right words for this letter, maybe I can be there with her in a way, just as she will always be with me. And really, as I write the ending to our story, it's exciting – because her story is just beginning.

**Esther Townsend**

Senior Social Worker – Looked After Children Team

*We are part of each others stories – it's a dynamic relationship*



## Relationships at the heart

I was hearing the last stage of a complaint from a parent of a child with an enduring and severe disability. We were working through a full child protection investigation and during that process, we had required that contact between the parent and child was supervised. Our concerns were our concerns – but this story isn't about that. What had happened was that we were no longer talking to this parent respectfully, we were not thinking about the reality of supervised contact for a frightened child in hospital or the impact on the parents and wider family. We were not clear enough about why this was our decision, how long this would go on for or what the parents' rights were in this scenario. Our relationship had broken down.

When I started asking the system what had happened, it gave me back the same answer: 'We were worried about the child's safety'. I couldn't understand fully why we had made the decisions we had. The workings out were unclear to me and to the parent.

We began a new investigation which started with me listening carefully to what the family had to say. Through the process that went on for months, the child's mum and I began to build a relationship based on mutual trust. She was able to see what professionals had been worried about but said: "I get where you were coming from but you went way too far – and you didn't tell me clearly what my rights and choices were. You didn't see how scared we all were and the impact that had on our child."

Our system was anxiety driven and punitive at that time. The family was in pieces. We'd remained focused on the risks as we saw them and made our judgement.

What I learned from this story was that, whether our decision was right or wrong, we have a huge accountability to make reasonable judgements, to use our powers reasonably and to make sure that our workings out are clear to families. When practice is based on relationships, you stick with the relationship and keep talking through the tough times, it's not about just being kind. It's about making sure everyone is focused on what has happened, what is best for the children, that everyone is using the best information available, following due process in order to get to a clear judgement that everyone understands. We got this wrong. That much was clear. We were able to reach a conclusion with the family but there was much learning for us. We are still learning now and we remain in conversation with the family.

This parent has had to fight for her child all his life. That hasn't changed but the relationship between us and our system has. It's no longer driven by anxiety and fear and I'm glad to say that the family has some respect for our willingness to say that we got it wrong. We've all been able to learn, grow and to move forward.

Every human being needs to be in a relationship with someone they trust in order to take a risk, to be motivated to do something different, to make a change for the better.

**Jacky Tiotto**  
Director

*Without trust there can be no change*



## Sunday lunch

I'm sitting in a coffee shop opposite the station in Sidcup meeting a new young person I'm going to be working with. His name is David and he's been looking for a job since January 2018; almost a year of making five or six applications a day. All his interviews have ended in disappointment and the last one he described as a total nightmare. Needless to say, David felt rejected and down but I kept encouraging him and he agreed we could do some interview training.

The training went well and I asked if I could meet his family. David was living at home at this point, having been with a foster family. I was worried though; his family are on benefits and I felt there was a high risk he'd be financially exploited by them - they wanted his benefits. It's sad that David's two brothers are still with foster families and don't talk to him because of his decision to go back to the family home.

The story raises an important question for our service. David wants his freedom and he also needs to belong. The sense of belonging pervades our work in children's services but how we manage this across the service is complex; it's an ongoing discussion. David and I talked about his hopes, fears and what he wanted for the future. He visualised himself becoming a father and realised that his family weren't actually his saviours.

I'm happy to say that David now has a job; he served me in Boots the other day. I saw his shirt didn't fit properly so went to Primark to get him a new one. He's amazingly resilient and has become an anchor for everyone. But how do we find him a safe space to anchor himself?

Finally, he moved out of the family home which he described as scary and brave. To reset the family relationships, we made a plan to get the family together for an informal lunch. I had to be creative and even took the family dogs for a walk with his dad one day as a way to get his trust. And we eventually managed to get the brothers to meet up for the first time in ages; it was a major step forward.

I'm a spoiled only child from Mauritius, I love building relationships and working with people and together with David, we'll make this work. Next week I'm going to meet them all after church to set a date for that lunch.

**Anonymous**

*Re-setting relationships with the whole family helps children in complex situations to belong*



## The Journey of Transformation – our practice

### Social worker

I first met Ben when he was eight years old. I'm not afraid to admit to feeling scared on my first encounter. He thumped his way into the room, snarled through his teeth at me, spat on the floor, turned over the sofa and made a half attempt to throw a vase at me.

Whilst trembling on the inside, I made a conscious effort to stay in the room and appear calm but didn't force Ben to talk to me. I noticed he was intrigued by me as, despite all his actions and on many occasions leaving the room, he always re-entered and eyeballed me as if to find out what I was all about.

I thought it was going to be a long, painstaking process. It wasn't easy and it did take time but Ben gradually started to look forward to my visits to the point that one day he asked me to take him out on his own and we went to the local park for a hot chocolate.

Every time we had a difficult visit, Ben would struggle afterwards,

### Independent reviewing officer

*When I met Ben, it took over six months before he was willing to have me in the same room, let alone have a conversation.*

*Ben came into care following a deeply damaging and traumatic childhood where he had been exposed to an environment rife with drug abuse, domestic violence and chaos.*

*In assessing Ben's needs at the time it quickly became very clear that he was going to require a specialised setting to contain and support his level of trauma and inner disturbance. Ben was placed in a therapeutic residential community which offered a high nurture environment staffed by skilled personnel.*



imagining that I wouldn't come to see him again and convincing himself I didn't care. I would always leave Ben a little note after these visits to tell him that I was sorry he was struggling, I would tell him something I had enjoyed during the visit and that I was looking forward to seeing him again soon.

One of our first wobbles came when I had a personal loss in my family and had to take some time off work. When I did come back, Ben almost couldn't believe that I had stood by my word and I hadn't disappeared from his life. Ben had learnt to trust that if I said I would do something I would do it. If there was something I couldn't promise, I would never do that and would always explain the reason why, even if he didn't want to hear it.

Ben's dad told me that when he first met me he had low expectations of me as a social worker. I'm proud to admit that he now speaks about the trust he has in me and the difference I have made to his family's lives.

*Although Ben had minimal contact with his family it was clear he had a deep and defining need to be with them. This need was a powerful constant. Ben's large extended family was for their part suspicious and mistrusting of professionals and their intentions. They felt they had been disenfranchised and believed their wishes, feelings and aspirations had been ignored or simply cast aside.*

I've always involved Ben's dad in his life and made sure that he is involved in decisions however small they may seem. I think this approach has made the world of difference to Ben who can see us all working together for the most important thing: him!

I've taken the time to get to know every single member of Ben's family, including sisters, brothers, grandparents, nieces and nephews and I feel to some extent I am treated as though I am one of the family. Ben's dad recently went to visit his own mum who he does not see very often and I was called as someone he wanted his mum to meet!



Cat Sherwin Social Worker  
and Mike Clayton Independent Review Officer

*Working together anything is possible*

*This development of deep mutual trust between family members and professionals alike was of axial importance. It allowed Ben to witness a peaceful, friendly and constructive rhythm to the communication between the adults around him and powerfully encouraged him to continue to invest in the agreed plans and aspirations for his future.*

*It ultimately led to a shared confidence to return Ben to the care of one of his sisters. The success of this endeavour was achieved through the creation of a strong and enduring container – essentially professionals and family working together towards achieving a common goal in a spirit of trust and confidence (outer qualities).*

*This, together with the professional embodying key qualities of empathy, trust, care and integrity (inner qualities) created the conditions for an alchemical transformation which saw a profoundly traumatised and deeply unhappy boy metamorphose into a happy and relaxed child confident in the love of his family and trusting in the professionals that helped make it all happen.*

## The journey of transformation – are we making a difference?

Mike and Cat have worked with this young person and their family for a long time. I was a new dimension in that I was a new manager to the service. I was keen to understand how the family felt about the service they were receiving. Without prompting, the father told me that Mike and Cat were fantastic, exceptional; that I should be proud of them and indeed I am.

It was a delight to observe that the family and professionals have developed such a strong relationship. This relationship made it possible for this successful reunification plan to happen.

The greatest take away is that the young person was incredibly happy to be with their birth family again. How do I know? They told me so.

**Charmaine Malcolm**  
Service Manager

*Families will tell you if you are making a difference*



## The journey of transformation – my thinking

At heart, the quest to help others is an inspirational journey and the ancient study of alchemy provides a profound metaphor for describing the journey. It is the transformation of something that has little or no value into something that has great value; beautiful and precious, even.

The alchemist places the base metal into a crucible or container which must then be perfectly sealed. Any weakness in the container risks fracturing the vessel, spoiling the alchemical process and thereby any possibility of transformation.

The qualities and skills needed by the alchemist or social worker have an inner and outer dimension. If the practitioner is to create a strong enough container for a child or young person, one that is sufficient to fuel the process of change or transformation, then partnership with others (outer) coupled to a creative use of self (inner) must be strongly aligned and integrated.

Outer: The task of the social worker to distil from the complexity that is a child's life a dynamic understanding of the needs and how to address those needs. From there, the challenge is to drive the agreed care plan forward. In practice, this means developing a holistic understanding across the network so that all the professionals surrounding a child are clear about their own role and where it fits. The social worker leads on creating the 'sealed container' where the child feels safe, held and supported. It is the therapeutic power of this containment that can create the 'alchemy' for change and transformation.

Inner: In the use of self, there needs to be a deep aspiration within the individual worker to marry the head and heart aspects that lie within us all. It is not sufficient to be simply analytic and forensic, essential though those qualities are. We must also relate compassionately with a therapeutic understanding, not only of other's pain, but also – crucially – of our own. We can only know others and take care of others in relation to what we know about ourselves and what it means to care for ourselves. There must be preparedness to look at our own pain and be committed to understanding those emotional forces that shape and drive us.

Alchemy and the process of transformation must be both an inner and outer unfolding where, as practitioners, we can authentically inspire others to believe in and pursue the possibility of change and personal growth. This is something I see happening in Bexley and recognise in myself.

**Mike Clayton**

Independent Review Officer

*Knowing ourselves enables us to authentically inspire others*



## MISS-understood

There I was on a Saturday afternoon shopping for a family BBQ in Morrisons. Trolley full of wine, beer, burgers, cakes – and who do I see walking towards me? A young person I was working with in the leaving care team.

There's always that element of risk when you live and work in Bexley. Part of my role had been pathway planning with the young woman, identifying areas of strengths and needs. We'd spoken at length about healthy eating, not relying on sweets, cakes and kebabs as a staple diet and limiting alcohol consumption. I'd worked with her for about a year, but she would still call me 'Miss'. I'd always say, "Don't call me Miss, I'm not a teacher, call me Kristina." She never would.

So when I saw her in the aisle, my first reaction was, can I hide? Can I dump my trolley? Pretend it isn't mine? Should I avoid eye contact? Or face the music? Okay, I thought, let's see how this pans out.

There she is, with a big smile on her face. "Hello Miss! Having a party are ya? Your trolley don't look too healthy!" BUSTED!"

We have a little chat, laugh about what I have in my trolley – I try desperately to find the little bag of salad at the bottom of the trolley under the cakes. She tells me what she's up to later and tells me how I'd be impressed that she wasn't late for college at all that week. We say our goodbyes and I realise it wasn't too bad.



The supermarket is packed, my young woman walks back up the aisle, gets near to the end of it and then shouts to me: “Ere Miss!! Forgot to say. Glad you’re practising safe sex, too!”

WHAT? I’m bright red, flustered, shoppers everywhere turn their heads and I don’t know where to look. So, I look in my trolley and she’d chucked in a packet of condoms when I wasn’t looking. Touche!

Funnily enough, we never spoke about our ad-hoc meeting in the supermarket again, but she did call me Kristina afterwards instead of Miss. Maybe she realised I was a real person too, not just a social worker.

**Kristina Tucker**  
Social Worker

*Keep it real – a sense of humour helps to build trust*



## Facing the future

In the back of a car I saw the face of the child who was moving from his foster carers to another new home – again. I was thinking about how it must feel for him; after seven or eight moves he was travelling 150 miles away from home, away from everything and everyone he knew.

The social worker was driving so I could concentrate on our child and support him as best I could. Getting in the car he looked emotionless and closed-down, but seemed happier on the journey, listening to his music and engaging in conversation. At times I could feel his nervousness and fear about the move so worked hard to distract him using the things we had done together in the past to make him laugh.

I understood how scary the situation must be, I'd experienced a traumatic childhood myself; it's what motivated me to become a foster carer and a social work assistant. But I pushed my own feelings to the back of my mind. I had been working with the pioneer programme in Bexley which trains carers to use collaborative problem solving (CPS) – a key element of which is learning to regulate yourself well and not allow your emotions to impact negatively on your work. We wanted to make sure he wouldn't run away again and that he'd be safe, stable and happy.

I've thought a lot about what made the difference with this young man and come up with two possibilities. One is the trust he had in the social worker and the team that this plan was the best for him. Lots of preparation had been done which may have helped him to understand why he was

moving. I also wondered whether this young man was so used to these sorts of changes in his life it had become the norm. He was used to having no control over his situation.

I'd built a good relationship with him before his move and it allowed me to use some of my knowledge of him to make him feel at ease. I was listening carefully to him in the car and showing him that I cared about his thoughts – which again I hope showed him we genuinely wanted what was best for him. The young man is now settled in his residential home and doing well which I am so happy and relieved about. I won't forget his face.

**Anthony Pearce**

Social worker assistant in the pioneer team

*We are all pulling together to implement the right plan for the child*



## A Thamesmead tale

With youth centres closing we were given a small, dated and unfriendly church space to work from. There was nowhere to display things on the wall, no storage and a lot of unhappy neighbours who didn't want a youth centre next door.

For a while we had zero young people; between 4 and 6pm after school, when you'd expect there to be youngsters around, it was dead. It was a big struggle to get the word out. We'd been threatened by a man illegally riding a moped on the footpaths. We couldn't safely go out and find where the young people were. Morale was low and it felt like we were fast exhausting all options.

But during a street session we ventured into a nearby park and met a group of twenty young people. After slowly gaining their trust they started to attend the sessions but then, of course, we really noticed how unsuitable the church space was.

My biggest piece of learning was just how isolated the residents are and how much distrust there is with professionals. I think it's the level of deprivation our young people experience; you can't underestimate it. I was lucky; I grew up in Bexley attending local youth centres and through that involvement had the opportunity to become a youth leader. I have a strong and capable staff team who persevered through challenging times.

We finally moved our sessions to the Link Centre which is much better suited, and we regularly get up to 75 young people attending. Hard work pays off.

**Nicole Porter**

Targeted youth worker

*Don't underestimate the level of deprivation young people experience*



## My fears

On that first visit I knocked on the door breathing hard, with no idea what awaited me on the other side. Crossing the threshold to make the assessment I had to face my fears. How do I begin to understand why the young person had a trachea and had to be suctioned? Would I be able to understand the relationships in the family and accurately assess the impact of the disability? How would the young person cope with the meetings?

I wanted to work with children with disabilities but at the same time I dreaded saying the wrong thing. I used to work in child protection where everything is highly structured and the processes are easier to follow. This new area of work was challenging, there are medical diagnoses to take on board and I hadn't been clinically trained. My fear of the unknown was heightened because getting the assessment right is so critical to the young person's life and the families' wellbeing.

As I entered the house I reminded myself of all the work I'd done to get to this point. The extra time I'd taken learning about the detail behind the medical terms, talking to the officer making the referral, reading and re-reading the information about the family. I guess you could say I'm a bit of a perfectionist. I love my job, the analysis side of the work and working out what support we can give the families, but none of that comes to life until you meet face to face.

Seeing the young person sitting there, waiting for me with his carers, his face open, voice quiet, I felt humble. I've learnt so much about the needs and complexities of life for young people with disabilities. It's vital to create a voice for young people whose voices aren't heard.

Yes, the processes of assessment maybe the same but every part of the story, from the understanding of the diagnosis, the way the assessment is carried out, the accuracy of the recording and the robustness of the approach must be right every time. I left the house feeling I'd achieved something.

**Laurantia Mqotsi**

Senior social worker children with disabilities

*Create as much time as you can for face to face work*

PLANNING  
FROM THE START

# Voices



## What life is like for me

### Wishes

C says if she had a fairy god-mother she would wish for infinity wishes, then all her wishes would come true. She says one of her wishes has come true, which made her happy but she's very quiet and doesn't want to tell anyone about it.

**Anonymous – aged 7**

### I'm going to play in the world cup for England!

I love football the best. D takes me to a football club on Saturdays, it's a small pitch, we do dribbling, passing, shooting. They were friendly but not like my friends at school, but we just go there and start playing straight away. I don't know if I'll play in attack or defence yet.

I bought my Arsenal shirt and shorts with me when I came from home. I support Arsenal and I'm interested in everything about Arsenal (and Tottenham.) If I'm sad, I don't tell anyone. I don't like maths but the tutors and teaching assistants help me. I want to play football every Saturday, to be in a team and get a coach to help me improve. One day I will score a goal at Wembley.

**Anonymous – aged 9**



**My life and playing football for Manchester United**

In my house with my mum, dad, sister and brother, there was a little problem, so we moved to care. I lived with a couple called K and L. My sister and brother lived with another couple, P and S. I did not like my new place a lot; I visited my brother and sister and played golf and went to McDonalds but five days later, I went back home. After one week I had to go to the police station then got picked up by K and L again.

The next day it was time for me to go to D and M's house, so I packed up my things and went to the social workers office, her name was N and we went in her car. When we got there, I put my shoes to one side and a toddler came up to me and her name was J. She went like "Tayo," and that's not my name, so it was difficult at first. We settled in and would go out a lot and watch movies at night.

Then we had to move on to T's house but I didn't like it there and I didn't like the dinner. So I told the social worker and she said there's another carer called F who visited us at school. When we went to F's house we had kebabs for dinner, it was great. We all live there now. There are so many things to say about my life being looked after.

Now I am at Monday club and I like how they do activities and you can have dinner there and do homework. In the future I hope for a better life with a good school that I will like, with good games and I will get to visit my friends.

**Anonymous – aged 10**

*During this Monday Club session, these children all tried fish for the first time*

# Vision

*We begin our work with families, driven by the principles of the Children Act 1989, which requires local authorities to promote the upbringing of children with their families where this is in their best interests and safe to be so. We therefore practice on the basis that families and children have a right to be together, that parents retain parental responsibility unless their children are adopted and that our work should enable this to happen – provided we can establish good enough safety for the children and support for the families.*

*Where we cannot secure safe permanence in the family network, our system is established to act quickly through the courts so that children are able to thrive in new and safer arrangements.*

## What matters...

We try to balance safety and vulnerability in families

– *it enables us to support them to stay together naturally if this is safe and in childrens' best interests*

We are clear about our purpose and our values

– *to enrich the lives of others*

We listen hard to children and act in their interest, not ours

– *it's what we are here for*

We plan long-term, working together for families

– *it's about sustainability*

We persevere through the challenges, support families to stay strong

– *in the best interests of the children*

We give parents the help they need to make changes

– *it builds their capacity*

We see a safer happier place for children

– *the best is yet to come*

## Heartache to hope

This story involves a mother (S) of eight children, all of whom had been removed from her care, with five subsequently adopted. We became involved when S called us to say she was pregnant again. The father is the same father as the last child removed from her care. I immediately went into a panic. They'd only been known to Bexley and to me for a year. Was everything I'd done with them superficial? They were meant to be separated? There were not meant to be any more children?

Our new approach to work with families made me stand back and see the positives among all the worry. She's called me to tell us she's pregnant, that's a major deal. She knows what's probably going to happen. My manager and I thought, that's already a strength, let's not immediately think the worst, let's do the proper pre-birth assessment and take everything that's happening now into account.

There were a lot of battles along the way. Most people's reaction was 'no chance'. 'Look at the history'. 'She won't be able to do it'. The path of least resistance would have been to go straight for a court order. Instead, we chose to take a different route, not with vague optimism but evidence to back up our preferred approach. We had started to ask how we could promote the upbringing of this child with their family- a basic foundation of the Children Act 1989.

We were starting to use effectively the Signs of Safety practice framework to have different conversations with the family and in the months that followed there was a positive outcome. It's definitely not about ignoring risk, but instead understanding that risk in among the strengths and solutions that the family have and, critically, the safety that

they can demonstrate over time for their children. We still look at a range of options and the bottom lines that have to be in place for each to provide the necessary safety. The mother, father and two youngest children now live together.

The success and challenges of this case prompted a serious success review where we looked at what worked and when things went wrong, what we did to make things right or improve them. I felt an immense amount of pride for the parents, the work they did during our time together and for coming forward to speak about their experiences in front of so many staff.

It is easy to forget, when we are worried about a child, that parents mostly have the solutions and the wisdom in their families to protect children and promote their welfare. This is what English law requires – the promotion of children’s upbringing with their families when it is safe enough and in their best interests. This is our first duty.

**Anonymous**

*Don't be scared to change your mind professionally*



## Encouragement and perseverance

This story takes place in a child's foster home and in other places we may never know. And it takes place in my heart.

Eight-year-old looked after child Sally and her brother were sexually abused. The horrific abuse came to the attention of children's services in 2013 when Sally was only four. They were both very traumatised. The likelihood of the children returning home was low to nil because their abuse was partly enabled by their birth parents' vulnerabilities; both had significant learning needs that impacted on their parenting.

It wasn't possible – or the best solution – for the children to be placed together and after problems with the first family, a foster carer, relatively new to fostering, was identified. Sally was already experiencing lots of issues, but the new carer had the capacity to love and care for her.

Not surprising, following the honeymoon period, a series of extreme behavioural issues that seriously threatened the new family, began. I found myself spending time encouraging Sally's carer to be patient, to persevere and to see beyond the presenting issues. With our support, things would get better.

In October, at the end of an event for Black History Month, I met up with Sally's carer. I was over the moon. The carer proudly showed me some new pictures of Sally and more importantly claimed Sally as her child. "Sally has come to stay and she's not going anywhere," she said.

I felt so proud that I'd encouraged the carer to persevere and so thankful to her that she did. Sally found love and commitment. No doubt the story goes on and there will still be obstacles as time progresses but I have no doubt in my mind that the worst is over. The best is yet to come for Sally.

Hurdles are there to be overcome, that's to be expected in families with such trauma. What's needed is empathy and encouragement both for the child and carer, especially for those who otherwise would give up in the face of challenges. This family will stay with me throughout my career.

**Adebola Sanyaolu**

Assistant team manager

*Continued support for carers enables them to give children the love they need*



## Staying rooted

You can tell many things about a tree by looking inside its trunk. Every year the tree adds a growth ring; if the concentric circles are broad that means the environment has been good and the tree had everything it needed to grow. But those rings also tell you when a young sapling is in a tough environment without the sunshine or water needed to help it grow into a strong, healthy tree.

It's just as important for our children with disabilities to have the right environment; then they can grow in a nurturing ecosystem, stay with their families and get the right support. We know it's tough. The children are often in single parent families, some men leave the women to cope on their own, there is poverty and the siblings can also suffer.

In our team we support children until they grow up and make sure there's a smooth transition to adult social care. In the past the right level of trust with our colleagues in the preparation for adulthood team wasn't there. There were children where information was inaccurate, problems were minimised, the message was that everything was under control when we knew this wasn't the case. There's a danger that with children who have continuing health needs the whole story becomes about the money and who pays.

When a new manager came into post, we took the opportunity to reset the relationship. We started regular meetings before we'd go to a complex case panel, involving our SEN colleagues and collectively trying to solve problems in advance.



When one of our severely disabled youngsters had brain surgery at the age of thirteen, we discussed the aftercare, put aside the issue of money and built a consensus on what support was needed for her to continue living at home. We did a lot of forecasting of needs over the long term, drawing up trajectories and different permutations, looking for best value to meet the young person's needs at home. We prepared a family plan accompanied with a resource plan for the complex cases panel. There was agreement at panel across a multi-agency team of professionals.

Now sixteen, this teenager is still at home, much longer than expected and her education has continued. The family felt supported and there's a support plan to the age of eighteen and beyond.

If we create the right environment, the clear air and nutrients, our trees – no matter how harsh their start in life has been – can grow and produce oxygen for us all. They are the breath of life.

**Owen Chiguvare**  
Service Manager

*Good planning supports families to stay together longer*



## The perfect time

“I’ve had enough,” one of our mums says. “I just can’t do it anymore.”

Dad is silent. The couple adopted two children and have reached crisis point. The daughter, who is 13 and has been with them since she was eighteen months old, has become violent towards mum.

“That’s so tough,” I reply, “I can see things aren’t working at the moment.”

Mum falters, “I’m under the doctor but...”

We’ve put a safety plan in place. She’s being treated for chronic depression. As professionals, we’ve had to think about the worst-case scenario but we don’t focus on that now. The first step is to get them both to come on our non-violent resistance course.

“I’ve tried it all before...” she says.

I remind them that they’re experienced parents who’ve overcome many hurdles over the years.

“When was the last time you had a good time with your daughter?” I ask.

Slowly we change the direction of the conversation. There was a time when they’d been painting their nails, picking out their favourite colours. They’d both been relaxed. Then step by step we talk through what a perfect day might look like.

“A good morning and a smile, that would be a start.”

We hold the idea of the perfect time, flesh it out and keep bringing the couple back to what they can all do to make it happen again. They come up with the idea of putting a post-it in her school bag to remind her they care. It gets a good response, so they try putting a chocolate heart on her pillow. Details matter.

We never go back to the arguments. The priority is to build their capacity to think and behave differently, to come up with solutions themselves. It can feel so lonely being in a situation like this, so we focus on broadening and strengthening the network around mum. The approach takes constant re-enforcement from everyone who supports the family. It won't always be workable to keep a family together, but our experience is good.

"You've changed my life," mum said. The course had been a real turning point. "I want to come back and help you."

Now she helps train other parents to stay safe and to stay together. I came to work in Bexley in 1990, I was the first Black Minority Ethnic employee in the department. It's so different now. I'm very proud of our work.

**Rosie Bedi**

Staying together team manager

*Focusing on positive conversations and signs of safety helps families to stay together*

OUR MISSION IS TO  
STRENGTHEN  
FAMILIES  
& help them stay together

## The kindness of strangers

After bubbling and bubbling for a long time, life at the family home had finally reached boiling point. I remember a stranger sitting quietly in the corner of the room. During a later meeting, I discovered that she was a social worker. That didn't change things; to me, she was still a stranger.

Nevertheless, I felt that the stranger was offering me a glimmer of hope for a better life during a time of uncertainty, isolation and anxiety. The stranger asked me many questions and wrote notes whenever I spoke. In hindsight, given that I love to talk, I can only apologise to that lady for leaving her with what would have inevitably been a lengthy visit note to record. I remember having two questions for her. What exactly is your purpose? And why on earth are you so nosy? I was subsequently accommodated in supported housing and my life began to really begin.

Fast forward to August 2018 when I walked into Bexley children's social care on my first day as a newly qualified social worker. I had been based in Bexley for the final practice placement of my social work degree and could not refuse when I was asked to return. Why? Because I felt that I belonged there.

For me, working for Bexley has never felt like a job. It's an opportunity for me to be part of an innovative workforce, a workforce that shares my passion for creating a better quality of life for children and families that are in need. Giving back is how I describe it. That's what gives me a fire in my belly and drives me on a daily basis.

I'm clear about my purpose - to enrich the lives of others. I'm committed to creating positive change for children and families and supporting children and families to recognise their value, and their own ability to succeed – just like the support I needed to recognise mine to get to where I am today. Every time I knock on a new door or walk in to a meeting introducing myself as a social worker, I remember that I am now the stranger in these people's lives. Now I can be the glimmer of hope.

**Connor Appleton**

Social worker

*Purpose and passion are clear for our staff*



## Let people be themselves

As a kid I followed my brother around, everywhere he went I was close behind. I saw him make his own decisions and choose his own path, so I did too. I never felt empowered at school, the setting and system didn't give me the space to decide what was right for me. We're a headstrong family, independent.

In my job as a participation officer, we focus on hearing the voices of young people in care. It's not a tick-box environment, we remove constraints wherever we can and, like any parent, we want them to achieve their dreams, to feel loved and cared for.

The young people keep me on my toes, and I've learned so much from them about myself. It might sound strange to someone who doesn't work in this field but the children in care have made me more resilient, because they are often so resilient - they've had to be. It can be challenging managing expectations though. It's hard for them to understand why change takes so long, the system is complicated to explain, people are juggling workloads and priorities shift.

We've just launched our Bexley Local Offer, that helps. It sets out our support to young people and families, it's clear about what they can expect, and we've co-produced it with them. The launch was a marketplace type event and one of our young women leaving our care helped me run a stall, collecting feedback from her peers on what the council could do to reduce loneliness, a big concern when you leave care. As a result, we're putting on a film night. We also do sessions including money management and cookery clubs.

Another of our youngsters is a great cook, I think he could be a chef, but I don't want to impose my view.

The young people are all successful in their own ways. My journey is married up with theirs. As they look to take their next steps, so do I. They've inspired me to study more. If they ask my advice I say, "don't give up and don't live your life for other people. Live it for yourself."

**Natalie Eastwood**

Participation officer

*Giving something of yourself, listening and acting on the voice of the child takes commitment*



## See the difference

I felt a real sense of hope – and a sense of self – when I attended the first residential signs of safety training. I connected to the relationship-based approach; it felt natural to me and I saw how it could really help us to help the families we support and the children we safeguard.

There wasn't one thing that stood out for me, it was a coming together of many things that encouraged a refreshing honesty and integrity in our work. The framework allows for deep thinking and it helps us translate what we're doing into a language that everyone can understand. It hasn't been an easy journey but it is rewarding.

In a family network meeting, I saw an extended family come up with their own support and safeguards, things they felt were manageable and realistic. Their plan works in their family and it meant that five children got to stay with family and not come into care. I see this so often.

Signs of safety uses words and drawing. Just yesterday, I heard a story about well-educated parents in high powered jobs who struggled to engage with their children. Initially they refused to draw anything but when they were finally supported to sit on the floor and draw together for the first time, it had been a revelation. There was engagement and laughter and the stark realisation of the impact that their arguing had on their children. The children also realised they had a voice and were loved.

I've seen parents and carers find their voices in child protection conferences and challenge and speak out for their children. They have created their own danger statements and



safety goals and worked hard to achieve the co-created plans. Our numbers of children subject to child protection plans have significantly reduced with many safe success stories. We are fortunate that our staff and senior managers are brave and courageous and respect the work that we are doing. They encourage the efforts that families are making yet trust that they – and we – will always act if there is evidenced risk or harm.

One of our service managers led by example in a powerful family finding session with a young man. It created a real bond between worker and young person. The outcome meant he was able to identify seven other safe adults to support him in his life. This has been a transformative few years in Bexley and I feel privileged and humbled to have been part of this journey.

**Karen Reynolds**

Family well-being manager

*A vision needs a practice framework – that's what makes the transformation*



## The flipchart Queen

It was a usual day at the office with a family stability review meeting planned for me to chair. I was prepared with my flipchart paper and trusty 'Nice Day' marker pens in hand, hoping that it would indeed be a nice day all round. Colleagues asked if I was having 'one of my meetings', knowing the tell-tale signs. I headed to the meeting room to prepare.

The purpose of the meeting was to review a very unsettled arrangement for a young boy with his carers and formulate a plan with all professionals involved, including them in the best way. Unfortunately, between the initial stability meeting and this day, the carers had given 28 days' notice, feeling that they could no longer continue to care for the young boy. Our aim was to support and stabilise the family.

The female carer attended the meeting together with her supervising social worker and the child's social worker. We were all aware of the notice given so it was particularly important not to apportion blame. We acknowledged that this was not an easy meeting and we were all certain that the carers did not take their decision to give notice lightly.

The best way to move forward was to look at where we had been, where we were now and where we wanted to be. Using the signs of safety model, we found out what was working well in the family. It was important that the carers were part of the transition plan to move the young boy to his next family and that they shared all the difficulties faced so that we could make the next home the best it could be, with all

the information needed to succeed. To achieve this, we needed to work in partnership and keep the child at the centre of our thoughts.

By the end of the meeting the carer left feeling valued and told her supervising social worker that it was much better than she expected. This also enabled the family arrangements to follow their course without completely breaking down. The happy ending is that with all the hard work done by the social workers and carers, the relationship ended in a positive way. To date the young boy is thriving in his new home.

Flipchart paper and trusted pens – you did me proud! Well, we all did.

**Patricia Lonergan**  
Senior practitioner

*A strong relationship-driven vision enables open and honest conversations*



## Strong as diamonds

It was clear that mum needed help with establishing boundaries with her child. She sat watching, not interacting and laughed nervously when the child lashed out at her. In my contact role with the family at one of our centres, I'd done lots of observation so I felt I already knew the child quite well before starting to work with them as a social work assistant.

I asked mum why she thought the child was lashing out. Mum couldn't see a link between the behaviour and a disclosure the child had made of sexual abuse by a family member. Mum hadn't initially believed the child, but it wasn't long before she saw his true colours.

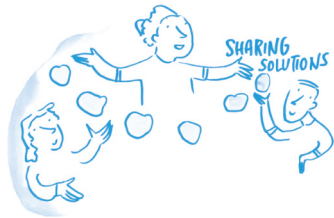
The challenge was to help mum get a wider understanding of her child's emotions and behaviours. We spent a lot of time together and I made a diamond tool for mum to use to help her manage the situation. It gives parents strategies – when something happens, then they know what to do.

What's stayed with me about this story was the way mum changed her narrative of the child. With a new story, we were able to help mum with her needs, help her to shift her relationship with her child and build capacity for the future. We are building stronger families.

I graduated in 2016 and all my friends went into teaching. I always wanted to work in child protection. I love the time spent doing direct work with families, that's what makes the difference. I'm now applying for an MA in social work.

**Danielle Capie**  
Family Key worker

*Strengthening parents' skills helps them protect children*



# Voices

## What life is like for me

### 2019 so far

It's the 21st of January. On January 1 I got a call to say my brother was homeless, he used to be looked after but he's 21 now and doesn't get as much help anymore. So, on 2 January, instead of starting my new job as a communications and research officer with an organisation called Coram, I took my brother to a café and started to get him sorted. I must have spoken to twenty landlords trying to find a place for him, then there were medical appointments and he had to eat. My mum and my sister have learning difficulties so they couldn't help. I had to put off starting the job until 9 January.

I've been doing the weekly shop and making dinner since I was twelve, lots of packets of sausage rolls and oven chips, basic stuff. There was always so much to do but I didn't want to get behind with my work, so I used to stay at school for any homework clubs or to work in the library, especially when it got to A levels. I don't know if it's good or bad, but people always come to me for help and I never say no. My diary is full of post-it notes so I don't forget anything...

# Voices

...Last year I got a place at uni to study social work at King's College but for various reasons – late DBS checks and other paperwork – I would have ended up starting the course eight weeks late and it wasn't really a runner.

I've started my job now but I can't really enjoy it until my brother is properly settled, although I like making PowerPoint presentations and the research. At the same time, I've applied again to go to uni this year and am getting offers and interviews, so I've got to get those organised. I still want to be a social worker.

Bexley Children's Services helped me a lot, but I think it was good that I knew what I wanted. It's better if you know your own mind and then they can support you to make it happen. And the highlight of my weekend was that I went paintballing and hit my brother in the face. Result!

**Anonymous – aged 18**



# Leadership

*Our work is underpinned by strong and consistent management oversight of practice. This comes in many forms, though at the core is a basic requirement that a robust case management system is in place providing data on demand, throughput and timeliness on all statutory basics.*

*While this is not statutory in early help, the same is required. Such quantitative data is complemented by collaborative reviews of practice where managers and practitioners discuss practice in a family together each month. This is a coaching exercise with a focus on learning and improvement, rather than blame and deficit. Case records are required to be up to date at all times and a case summary produced each quarter.*

*We operate an open conversation policy where all practitioners are encouraged to discuss practice and talk with managers regularly. The director of children's services and the lead elected member review practice on a ten-weekly basis through a performance board.*



## What matters...

We stay visible and connected, not overbearing or over managing

– *it's about clear and strong oversight, we call this 'intimacy in practice'*

We ask tough questions, use data, experience and instinct

– *to inform our decision-making and retain our curiosity*

We are supportive, helping staff to help young people face harsh realities

– *it makes our commitment sustainable and authentic*

We stay strong and contained in the darkest moments

– *it allows us to focus on families' needs*

We are relentless in the pursuit of improvement

– *it's innovation driven by purpose and not settling for second best*

We have humility and show our humanity, when we get it wrong

– *it's okay to work to reasonable not 'right' judgements*

We shift mindsets, build new narratives with respect and kindness

– *it's about changing stories (theirs and ours)*

We go the extra miles

– *the young people's successes are our reward*

## Going the extra miles – to university

It was a few days before students were due to move into the halls of residence and in order to not to be seen as different, F wanted to move in on Saturday like every other student.

“Like every other student” stuck in my mind because I envisaged everyone else being supported by mum and/or dad. Going to college can be a daunting time but I believe it is more so for care leavers. I was glad F asked me to help, there was no-one else and, naturally, I agreed. Saturday morning arrived and I drove over to her supported lodgings, armed with a suitcase for some of her clothes. We loaded the car with as much as we possibly could – a van had been arranged for the remainder of her belongings later in the week – and we headed over to the University of Greenwich.

The first job was to collect the key for the accommodation, a long queue was already forming. As I’d thought, all the students were with their parents, F would have been alone. On arriving at the halls and finding the room and there was a lot to do and a checklist. F was looking to me the entire time to guide her as we signed forms, checked the condition of everything, chose which cupboards she wanted in the kitchen and started to unpack.

F was lucky, she had a large room but it had been closed up for some time, as had the kitchen. It felt good to open the windows and let in some air. We made a note of everything that was damaged or missing and informed the relevant people before heading off to get lunch and buy some air fresheners!

On returning to the halls of residence, I left F to make friends and find her way around campus with them. I cannot imagine how difficult it would have been for her to turn up at university by bus with all she could carry and watch others move in with all their belongings and the support of family.

I know it meant a great deal for her to have my support and, yes, I gave up a few hours of my weekend, but when I left her, I felt like a proud parent. I had had the pleasure of watching this young lady achieve her GCSEs, excel at college and in her work placement and now start university – what better reward could anyone have for simply doing your job?

**Lorraine Petersen**

Deputy Head of the Virtual School

*Leaders don't lose their connection with young people*



## The darkest moment

“I need to speak to you,” my colleague said. There was no cheery “good morning,” and his face had a fixed expression I hadn’t seen before. He swallowed hard and began to explain.

I was a new manager doing a good job, I thought. I wanted everyone to see how committed I was to the service and the children in our care. It was a bright sunny day, a complete contrast to the news that would change everything.

A child had died. I was flooded with anxiety; our protection plan hadn’t worked. My brain raced. I’m a very open, expressive kind of person with a lot of energy. I wouldn’t normally hide my feelings, but I knew that my reactions were critical.

I had to be clear and concise when I felt the exact opposite. Keeping my tone of voice low and calm, I touched my colleague’s shoulder to try and reassure him, at the same time as trying not to shake. I had to think through the immediate next steps, plan quickly and work out how I would tell my own manager. There was no time to pull myself together, it had to be an instant switch. I collected as much information as I could and went to pass on the news. My manager’s face went pale, his eyes widened. Again, I managed to hold firm and to share the information with clarity so that our response was right.

What I hadn’t appreciated was that my reactions would have such a major impact on others. It might be obvious but until you’re in the situation, you can’t know. I had to draw on my reserves and dig deep to manage a devastating event in the best way I could.

The way the situation was communicated was vital. We all modelled leadership in what we said and how we behaved. I checked in regularly with the social worker, making sure that she felt supported and able to focus on supporting the family. Throughout the rest of the day my manager and the rest of the senior leadership team came to check on us, so that we were supported too. But it was the worst day of my professional life.

**Carlos Galaz**  
Service manager

*How we talk about the darkest moments models the leadership we need*



## Behind the numbers

In January we were visited by another authority, they came to our performance board, curious to see what outstanding looks like. The performance board might sound dry, corporate and full of statistic laden heavy reports, but to me it felt quite brave to open that meeting to scrutiny. We ask difficult questions a lot in Bexley; as a leader that's what you do. But the performance board is where we get behind the numbers to the real story – how are we helping children?

I was curious to see what the visitors would make of it. To me it's absolutely critical but there's always a doubt. What if we're not all that? What if we start digging and expose something unexpected? Or maybe they'll go back to their council not getting us and not seeing why our approach matters?

That day we were looking at the number of child protection assessments we'd had that month. We interrogated the numbers. Were there too many cases? Or too few? Were we missing something? I wanted to know if the children had been seen alone. How were they feeling? Did they seem frightened? Were they able to express themselves? That's a part of the social workers' skill I was interested to explore. Were they able to draw out the children's answers in a safe and caring way? And how long does a child protection investigation take? It could be five to seven weeks; to me that feels oppressive, so how does it feel for the child and the family?

“You talk about the data as if it’s about children’s lives,” one of the visitors said.

I was proud of my colleagues, they stood up straight, they weren’t defensive, and their answers weren’t self-serving. In some councils, I guess the public duty to monitor can be a bit of a chore, not for us. When I asked one of the newly qualified social workers, how can you be better? I got both a frank and thoughtful answer that started with, “I think I can support our children better by...” and finished with some actions we could do as a leadership team to help. There are always takeaways. We are relentless in that regard.

At the end of the meeting another visitor thanked one of the team leaders; “That was such a good conversation.”

You can do anything with numbers but our data dashboard is real. It tells us the stories we need to hear.

**Jacky Tiotto**  
Director

*Management oversight comes to life when data is about children and family’s lives*



## Bexley Witch Project

There was a smell of damp and pine needles in the air as we gathered by the legendary Witches Tree - a group of three trees which had grown together twisting and gripping one another to form gnarled spooky faces in the dancing torch light. It was Friday evening at Hindleap, the borough-wide youth work residential weekend. Scary stories were being told and the fifty young people were to be released like wild animals into the woods to explore, burn off energy and allow everyone to get some sleep that night.

The young people disappeared as quick as a flash. The fifteen youth workers gathered in a huddle to plot. The plan wasn't complicated. They were going to hide in the bushes around the Witches Tree and when the young people returned, they would jump out and terrify them.

As the newest member of staff, my job was to gather the young people at the bottom of the long incline that led up to the tree and give the other staff time to hide. I had to act fast as torches were spotted below and the workers were worried the idea would be scuppered. I made my way down the slope, hoping to slow their progress. I shouted that they needed to gather round as I had something to tell them. What I heard was odd, incomprehensible voices, unexpected sounds, something strange was going on.

Then it hit me, I turned and began running back up the hill towards some suspiciously giggly bushes. I tried to explain the problem to the bushes but was told in no uncertain terms that I was to leave and stop giving the game away. Okay, I thought, on your head be it. Roughly 30 seconds



later the bushes erupted and about 15 Bexley Council youth workers came storming out screaming, shouting and whooping like maniacs.

They got their wish, the French students sharing Hindleap with us that weekend were frightened to death. It was the wrong group.

There are three leadership lessons here. It's good to run your ideas past the boots on the ground, they often have vital information. We should listen to people even if we think they are trying to ruin our brilliant ideas. Sometimes the naysayers have a good reason for saying nay. And sometimes it can be the right plan but the wrong time.

I also learned the meaning of the French word Merde!

**James Heath**

Targeted youth worker

*Listen to the frontline, even when they disagree – it affects the outcome*



## Snakes and ladders

Our journey to a more permanent stable workforce has at times felt like a game of snakes and ladders. In 2012 when Ofsted assessed us as inadequate, around only 50% of our social workers were permanent. To climb the board we needed to get, keep and grow the best social workers – to deliver better outcomes for our vulnerable children and families. But at the start, we seemed to move a few steps forward and then land on a snake.

We made some early policy changes including an increase in pay, grading and annual leave. More recently we have made some further increases to annual leave and taken a more flexible approach to relocation including using the scheme for mortgage deposits. Turning the situation around was a priority for our Cabinet Member, this roll of the dice has helped move us up the ladder of progress. He's someone who's shown amazing commitment to improving the service.

The snakes were often harder to spot. When we hear about someone leaving, our response is to get closer to the managers, base ourselves in the service to really understand what is happening. In the Human Resources world, recruitment is sometimes seen as a transactional part of the service, but we have integrated our workforce resource alongside our strategic, advisory and employee relations teams so that there is a full appreciation of what the service needs. Across London, there seems to be a view that you're never going to get a full complement of permanent social workers but we never accepted that view and we keep pushing on.

About half-way up our board we noticed a tipping point. We noticed large numbers of agency workers wanting to convert to permanent roles. Some of that boost was due to changes in the tax system (IR35 regulations) but a deeper shift had begun. People were noticing the new positive environment, the leadership, smaller caseloads, the fantastic learning and development offer – and some of the agency workers started to feel insecure.

We're now around 90% permanent but there's more to be done and our focus really has to be on retention. We're talking to our staff about where we need to improve, we're looking at the culture and we want to spread the learning from our journey across the board.

**Lorraine Barlow**

Human Resources Manager

*A healthy obsession about the workforce is key to leadership*



it doesn't cost much  
to CHANGE THE CULTURE  
LET'S WORK TOGETHER!

## The nitty-gritty

The first time I met him was in a secure unit in a random little town in Cornwall. I was struck by how much it looked like a prison, barbed wire over the fence of the outdoor area and doors that didn't open until the last one had clunked securely shut. I couldn't imagine how the teenager in front of me was capable of all the things I'd read about him – missing for weeks on end, dealing drugs along the county lines and in a local gang.

I can confidently say he wasn't pleased to have social workers in his life! Every time he went back to living in the community things started to take a turn for the worse and he'd return to the secure unit. The second time, I spent the weekend collecting and washing his clothes which I bought to him in a suitcase because everything he owned was in black bin bags. My manager messaged me saying, "I am going to say thank you, as I'm pretty sure he is not in a place to yet." That was correct. He called me a fairly unpleasant name and told me he had people watching me. I was deflated.

Fast forward a year and the pattern repeated itself but this time he was approaching the age of eighteen. I was thrilled that despite his fractious relationship with social services over the years, he and the personal advisor from the leaving care team hit it off straight away. At the end of the meeting, he shook the personal advisor's hand and for the first time in my three years working with him, he turned to shake mine, as though in a peace offering.

We had another small victory with his family who were heartbroken at the choices he had made. We supported the parents to access a therapeutic intervention called video interactive guidance which supported them to interact well with their son. As a result, their relationship improved and he even attended a family party for the first time in more than three years.

There's no fairy tale ending. I was gutted when I found out what had happened to him. I felt like I had failed in supporting him to get onto a better path in life. It's important to remember the positives though. There's a strong commitment in Bexley to vulnerable young people and supportive management. I feel valued.

**Cat Sherwin**  
Social Worker

*Value your staff and help them work through the harsh realities*



## A more beautiful question

Social workers ask difficult questions all the time both to the children and families we work with and of ourselves, especially as managers. Are our services good enough? What's the young people's experience of the system? How do you know?

It's a professional curiosity that you don't lose as you move into more senior roles, you utilise the skill in a different way. Because we operate in such a high trust climate, you want to be sure that everyone else has asked the right questions too, that they know what the answer should be and whether it feels right. I draw on years of experience to make these sorts of judgements, to listen to my gut in a structured way. It's not random and it's much more than the stats – 95% of our visits might have been completed on time but what was meaningful for the child?

A while back, I started asking more about our service for young adults leaving care because it felt wrong. What I was picking up, in the nuanced answers to my questions, was that we needed to learn more about the emotional connections between the social workers and our young people.

We commissioned a diagnostic report, a deep dive into the situation, and found that there was some brilliant work but it wasn't consistent enough. We asked, what can we all do to improve our support for young people leaving care? That included us as managers; were we helping our social workers to do the job they wanted to do? It wasn't about blame, or who could, would, should have done this, that, or the other.

We saw and heard how much the staff cared. As a result, we developed training and put in more capacity where it was needed and changed our approach.

Working here is stretching, we are dealing with vulnerable children and young people in really difficult situations. I'm often in five places at once, trying to do ten things at the same time. It's hard, but I love it. I try to be really visible and to make it fun. In the answer to my questions, I'm listening for the word "our". That all staff have a shared passion for "our" young people.

**Jo Cross**

Head of Service

*In high trust environments, ask tough questions, use data, experience and intuition*



## Kids do well if they can

Up until the age of 30, I was a painter and decorator. Looking for a career change, I took up weekend work supervising young offenders serving community hours. Listening to their stories of being in the care system convinced me that I could make a difference. I qualified as a social worker in 1993 and for the past 25 years I've worked in children's homes and fostering services.

In 2017, the council gave its support to an innovative approach to dealing with challenging behaviour from looked after children. Collaborative and Pro-active Solutions (CPS) originated in America around ten years ago and I'm proud to be part of the team that has helped introduce this approach in Bexley.

It's well understood that many young people who are in looked after care exhibit challenging behaviour that is testing to parents, teachers and foster families. Adult responses to these challenges often presume that the child misbehaves because they want to and so interventions usually focus on rewards such as star charts, and sanctions such as detentions. Michael, aged 10, had a troubled start in life. He entered care aged eight and had six foster homes in just his first year as carers struggled to manage the very difficult behaviour that he showed.

The CPS approach, however, assumes that every child wakes up wanting to succeed in the day ahead, shifting from 'kids do well if they want to', to 'kids do well if they can.'



A year ago, Michael was living with a family trained in Collaborative Problem Solving. Michael stayed with his CPS carers for a year, where he is now in school and has recently been able to move to a permanent foster family.

Over the past year, 35 of our foster carers have been meeting weekly to learn this new way of understanding challenging behaviour. Being part of this approach is how I hope to make a real difference to the future of young people and their families in Bexley.

**Adrian Duffy**

Fostering team manager

*Behaviour is a form of communication - leaders need to understand it to make change*



## The building blocks

My starting point as the acting service manager was sub-zero. I would go into meetings and introduce myself; “I’m Charmaine from Family Wellbeing” and you would see eyes rolling or people would start doodling. This would be a mighty challenge but there could only be one way - up. My new office was full to the brim of nothing useful to the service or to me. There was little trust or respect and you could feel everyone waiting for the story of failure.

I grew up on a community estate in Brockley. From an early age I had a clear sense of belonging and a responsibility to do well for the community. After becoming a youth worker, I decided to switch to social work. Now I position myself to be a social investigator, an advocate and champion for children. I wanted to make the idea a reality, and to show that every individual has a right to a life free from harm or abuse.

This would mean communicating more than I’d ever had to before, networking, emailing, telephoning, lunch dates, reflective discussions, working groups. I had to think about how I could show the difference I was making in the service. It required PG Tips (and lots of it) with a hearty sausage sandwich, omelette and chips, a stroll along the river and a SWOT analysis of me and the service. This gave me my focus, the building blocks of change.

Our story could not be told if it were not for the children centre managers, partner agencies, those incredible family keyworkers and emotional health counsellors. Now when I hear people talk about the journey of the Family Wellbeing

service, I quietly rejoice because I am humbled - humbled that my colleagues, seniors and peers, supported me, showed me kindness along the way.

Children and their families provided us with a challenge, they told us the service they expected to receive, they shared their voices, wishes and feelings candidly, and respectfully and so helped to shape the service.

Ofsted said; “A broad range of support is provided by highly skilled practitioners who work effectively together. Creative direct work and good assessments lead to dynamic plans, all of which are making a positive difference in improving children’s circumstances.”

I try to lead from the front but in partnership and be true to my core values as a social worker, working as a service manager.

**Charmaine Malcolm**  
Service Manager

*Authentic leaders live their values in strong teams and in partnership with others*

CHANGING ATTITUDES: IMPROVING LIVES

# Voices

## What life is like for me

### Enjoy your time

I've been in social care for just over one year. I came from Albania by lorry; it took two weeks. When I arrived, I went to the authorities, spent one week in Croydon and applied for asylum. Then I was sent to Bexley. The social workers have helped me with everything I need. I live three minutes away from the youth club, there are staff on site 24 hours a day so I don't have too many worries. I go to college three days a week to learn English.

One problem I have is the other boys shout at me, call me names, they try to get at me. I have a brother living in Greece I think, I haven't spoken to him for about five years. My sister is in Albania but I don't know where my mum and dad are.

I'm not really sure of the future, it's not up to me. My case is being considered by the government.

I'd like to become a bus driver. What I'd say to people in Bexley is that it's good here, people will help you.

**Anonymous – aged 17**

# Voices

## No blame

Aged nine I went into care, I didn't understand what was going on. I thought it was my fault and that I was to blame. I remember the first car journey when I went into care, I remember the strong smell of petrol and feeling anxious.

When I stepped out of the car and went into my new bedroom, I felt okay because I was with all my brothers and sisters. That didn't last long though as they split us up. Looking back the only thing I would change is my behaviour and my rudeness. My social worker has helped me to understand now that going into care wasn't my fault but back then it was all new to me.

**Anonymous – aged 17**



# Culture

*Relationship based practice requires a social work environment that supports practice to be as good as it can be. Every social worker and manager has to feel that they can do their best work with the backing of their leaders and an acceptance that error is possible. We try to work to 'reasonable' not 'right' judgements. This means that reasoning has to be clear and the rationale for decisions has to be obvious. We call this 'showing your workings out' so that anyone can understand why, at the time, the decision was made as it was.*

*If this is clear, then practitioners are protected in practice and blame is less likely. In addition, we focus on workflow and caseloads. We operate a caseload of 17 children per practitioner in teams where there are no more than 80 children. This enables the team managers to know their children and families well.*

## What matters...

We value each other and say so

– *it's part of our culture*

We expect challenges, knowing that together we can overcome them

– *it's how we build confidence*

We make authentic connections with colleagues and families

– *it means we respect the wisdom in families to find their own solutions*

We support each other to become leaders at all levels

– *it promotes genuine growth and learning for everyone*

We give people the skills and opportunities to reach their potential

– *it's an ongoing investment*

We communicate at speed but we make space to think slowly and to reflect

– *it's how we make sense of the complex worlds we all inhabit*

We create an environment that is focused on making practice as easy as it can be

– *it enables the complex work with families to happen effectively*

## The hankie brigade

I made an unusual connection with another social worker I was working with. A parent became extremely upset when discussing their child's future plan. Simultaneously, we both took a hankie out of our bags and offered it to the parent to use. Talking together after the meeting we discovered we'd both attended the same school in Liverpool many years ago.

We'd been in different years but taught by the same strict order of nuns who insisted that we always carried a clean handkerchief on our person. Being too young for a handbag this was usually tucked into our knickers. The connection was made and from then onwards we called ourselves "the hankie brigade," and even shared a hankie wave whenever we met.

Connecting with colleagues means we can connect with families. We need to connect with the families to connect with the children. This is one of the qualities I embrace, to keep a sense of self and to get into the family and child's shoes. Our team has elements of a special family because it's based on the relationships that connect. Just doing the connecting is so important amongst the team because, like the work we do, dynamics shift all the time. The results aren't always immediate but the doing of it is so important.

These days I have a bag on my desk full of bright and colourful things that make me and the children smile – it includes a hankie. I worry sometimes that I am using intuition and empathy when colleagues or families don't want it. But the connections are authentic and although sometimes it can take a while, it's a small and vital step.



I hope that if they move on, they take something important about our relationship or about the bag of interesting things. The connections we make are authentic, they focus on our commitment to what we want to achieve and what we do well together.

Just remembering to make a connection with anyone so that the work can happen is the key to my success.

**Jennie Josey**

Social work assistant

*An authentic connection with colleagues is vital for working well together*



## Red peppergate

It was our version of Ready, Steady, Cook, where the TV audience holds up cards to share its views. Green tomatoes if the feedback is good, red peppers are bad news. We used cards at a staff conference with 150 social workers to ask for feedback on how we were doing as leaders. It was a sombre moment to look out at a sea of red.

Our colleagues told us we needed to do better – with communication, clarity of procedure, progression to senior grades and just about everything else that would contribute to them remaining in post. It turned out to be an epiphany for the senior leadership team. We realised that the first and only step to sustained improvement in the outcomes for families was a stable, committed and consistent workforce, supported by open leaders who were willing to listen.

In the most challenged places – of which we were one – taking care of frontline practitioners and their social work environment can often be designated as a lower priority than the decisions and budgets that must be presented, the reports, the statistics and the monitoring. It was clear that if we allowed this to be the case in Bexley, we would starve the practice of the nutrients it would need to entice special and rare social workers to take root. A barren and unfed workforce will always move in search of an environment that looks like the one they imagined when they first decided to train; one that provides them with the energy, tools and means to help families.

So, on a mission to overcome the myth that time with the frontline is a luxury no leader can afford, our senior managers grabbed their tools. These included team

discussions to think about the practice environment and fortnightly keep in touch meetings with no agenda. Three years on, we still do this. It's what allows us to get essential communications out quickly. And there are regular whole staff conferences with the famous red pepper and green tomato cards. Our leaders know the value of feedback, it's the active ingredient in our system and the way we check out how it feels to practice in a place.

As leaders our job is to enable the work that our staff want to do by investing in time to listen, reflect and be there for them. The rest happens as it does in nature, children and families learn, change and grow and so do we, quite organically and wonderfully.

**Jacky Tiotto**

Director Children's Services

*Enabling your workforce to do their best work,  
listening and spending time at the frontline is  
fundamental to improvement*



## Not 17 again...

I was 17, it was my first day at work in the council and I couldn't find my way into the building. I sat outside crying. Eventually I pulled myself together, took a few deep breaths and found someone to help me with the way to my new team.

When I started off as an apprentice, my choices were either to work in retail or work for the council and make a difference to the place where I live. It was a no-brainer. We had one day a week in college where apprentices from different companies doing different jobs came together. I made a group of friends who I'm still great friends with now. After hearing about the work I was doing, two of them gave me their CVs and now we all work at the council together. It makes your working day that little bit easier.

The main difficulty I find with my work now is the high demand and workload. As an executive support officer, you do not want to let your director or the deputy director down; the work in children's services is so important.

I'm 24 now and I love my job. What I've learned is that every challenge I come across gives me confidence. Believe in yourself when you are challenged, and you'll get the outcome you want.

**Ailie Robinson**

Executive Support Officer, Corporate Leadership Team

*Building confidence in your people really matters*



## Unstuck

That was me with my feet in the mud! Well and truly stuck, going absolutely nowhere. I was a senior social worker in awe of other people's abilities and success. I felt I couldn't be a manager, would never get a promotion, couldn't do it on my own and was unable to see my own achievements. And the worst thing was, I knew what was holding me back – it was me! I'm a grown woman, I shouldn't need others to tell me what I was capable of but that's where I was.

It was coming to work in Bexley that changed things. From my peers and right up the chain, the managers, service manager, head of service and deputies and the director, they saw something in me. "You can do it!" they all said. It was so powerful. I feel a bit emotional writing it down.

So, children's services is the hero of this story. The department helped me identify my skills and gave me a clear insight into my abilities. They believed in me, pushed me and encouraged me, gave me opportunities to demonstrate what I could do and coached me to shift my thinking - I was making a difference and could do more. My partner backs me up too but honestly, I think it could only have happened here. I started to believe that I had the ability to take the next step.

When the chance came, I took advice, researched and prepared well for the interview. I benefited from the wisdom of others who had started as ASYEs, and then become seniors, ATMs, interims and finally service managers. I got the job and have been a proud public servant, walking tall ever since.

Now I try to do the same in my work, it's what gets me up in the morning. I'm proud of the outcomes we deliver and that I benefited from a culture that enabled me to be the leader I am today. Success doesn't happen by accident, in Bexley it's part of the system. My colleagues showed me how to develop and I share the improvement journey in turn so that we develop from within. That belief worked for me and doing it for someone else is exciting.

**Jane Ayres**

Service Manager for Family Support and Child Protection

*Our system supports us to become leaders – and we develop others in turn*



## The value of feeling valued

Did I say I only expected to stay in Bexley for four months? It's now about to be my twentieth month and I'm happy I've had the opportunity to stick around. In the last six months, we have new legislation, the board has gone (the first in the country to join the home for retired safeguarding boards in the sky) and a new safeguarding partnership for children and young people in Bexley has been born.

I'm wondering now whether feeling valued is the same as feeling motivated and is it the same as feeling challenged? I'm not sure. The challenge? Learning a new local context, sussing out the key players, the culture, knowing what gives. Then there's the making sense of, applying some diplomacy to and pre-empting the next difference of. I told colleagues I felt motivated by the challenging landscape.

Where has the journey through this landscape taken me and our old board? To some difficult conversations. No pain, no gain, they say. No pain, no gain, I say that, too. For me, this isn't a story about heroes and villains. It's a story about remembering with grace that we all have different jobs to do.

To cross the finishing line and publish our new safeguarding arrangements by October was demanding. We had to steer through the necessary governance, get the right people in the room and sometimes encourage the right people not to be in the room - for the greater good. And then at the last board meeting, there was a lump in my throat as our chair offered her final reflections and thanks.



Throughout the journey, I have been motivated by the creative thinking of some of my colleagues – I have absolutely not experienced that in other work places. I have also been motivated by the encouraging words of those colleagues. In turn, I feel like I add value. Being told you are contributing is incredibly motivating. There aren't the hours in the day always – hardly a revelation I know – and it can be challenging to find the time to value what other people are contributing, especially when we are too blinded by the challenge. But because one or two people have found the time for me, I've stuck around.

**Tim Woodings**

Programme Manager - Bexley Safeguarding Partnership for Children and Young People

*Make time to value what others are contributing*



## He knew my name

I was recruited from South Africa and relocated to the UK in 2015. I was really stressed on my first day coming to work at Bexley not knowing what to expect. I was met downstairs by my manager, and they had a desk for me to sit at with a cup of tea and some reading material. All the team members were really welcoming. The service manager came to introduce himself to me during the day and I was really surprised that he knew my name.

I literally felt like a fish out of water as the social work system felt completely different from my training in South Africa but team members were so helpful which really made it easier for me to adjust. I had so many questions – some of them felt really stupid – but their support and non-judgemental attitude enabled me to ask whatever I needed to and not feel embarrassed by it. Team members were very supportive in giving me reading material around issues like legislation, helping me to get used to the differences in threshold between South Africa and England and accompanying me on initial visits.

I finally realised that the fundamentals of social work remain the same and it is not that different between South Africa and England. I can do this with support and transferring the skills I already have. HR were very supportive as well during the process of relocating here and afterwards, especially the relocation package.

What really impressed me about Bexley from the start was the accessibility of managers and how well colleagues were working together and supporting each other. Good working relationships are so important, it motivates you to do your best.

**Antonel Van Rooyen**  
Social Worker

*Small details show it's truly a supportive environment  
– it's motivating*



LOOK AT  
BIG + SMALL  
DIFFERENCES

## The glass palace

We were in a run-down building in the middle of nowhere. It was dull, dark and more or less derelict. No-one listened to us, we were forgotten, physically separate, a case of out of sight, out of mind.

I was a new manager in that awful environment. Being there made me feel like I was dealing with obstacles on my own, it was lonely, and the anxiety got to me at times because my concerns definitely didn't feel shared. It was a learning curve alright, managing a team that was under-valued by the then management team.

The relief we felt with the change in leadership was enormous, there was a blast of fresh air but it was warm not cold or cutting. Three things made the difference. The leadership showed they were invested in the staff, treating us like we were part of the new children's services family, the implementation of the Signs of Safety ethos strengthened our work and there was the magic of the move into the new glass palace in Bexley. A former building society headquarters, it says solid, dependable, beautiful and modern.

The physical open plan design of the offices made us immediately visible. Relationships are stronger and having the space to meet with others in the department meant it was so much easier to do our jobs. The building reflects and supports the culture of openness. The glazing makes it transparent, senior managers are so approachable and the place has a light spacious feel. There's a real sense of civic pride in the building, Bexley is important and the work we do really matters.

I know not all councils get the chance to upgrade their buildings, especially when resources are scarce. We absolutely needed to re-locate but what we got from our new leadership team was more than the shiny new civic centre. Leadership isn't about desks and parking spaces, it's about a real connection, that went hand in hand with warmth – and a belief in us as practitioners and our abilities to improve the lives of others. That's why I love my job.

**Sandy Bansil**

Team manager, Local Authority Care Team

*Belief in your team's abilities is more important than the bricks and mortar*



## Space to grow

At the end of my first week as a manager in the early help team, my head of service asked me to attend a meeting about children and young people deemed to be on the edge of care. It was a challenging meeting that felt more like an interview and I'd felt bad that I'd gone above my service manager in certain ways, being asked to attend something so high-powered.

A few months after that I had the opportunity to bump into the director. "Patience," she said, "I've heard about you. We need to talk."

We had a long conversation about the vision for early help and that's where opportunities started to open up. I was invited to attend the Engine Room, a meeting chaired by the director. It was full of ideas, drive and energy. I was able to tap into a network of expertise and support that has been invaluable. I've had the joy of ongoing support and guidance for my own development and the services. From there I was asked to lead a project called Staying Together.

I see a better world as one where everyone has a can-do attitude even in the face of difficulties and one where you can succeed even if you don't have a definite understanding of what you're doing. Top down hierarchies can stifle employee experiences and leave workers with a lack of control, motivation and desire to excel. My experience has

been so different, I felt valued and have been given the tools and opportunities to reach my potential. I hope to do that for someone else too.

**Patience Idowu**

Service Manager – Multi-agency safeguarding hub and Out of hours

*Leaders notice the diversity of skills in the workplace and use them*



# Voices

## What life is like for me

### All about me!

Callum has two mummies and daddies. He feels great and nice because he's lucky to have this. Callum sees mum and dad at the contact centre, he's always excited because he loves his mum and dad and loves seeing them. His favourite colour is orange.

Callum had to overcome feeling upset when leaving his mummy and daddy to go his new mum and dad's place. He says he was only upset for about half-an-hour.

Callum is happy with where he is now and wouldn't change anything.

**Anonymous – aged 7**



# Voices

## Invincible

The good thing about living with a foster family is you get a roof, you get food and also a bed. They look after you.

I've moved around a lot. I have moved through London, 20 different places, Yorkshire and Russia. My grandparents live in Russia. I moved to random houses to sleep on the floor, it was embarrassing and on the streets. I also got abused by my dad, he took drugs.

I have done boxing for years and a little bit of rugby.

I can be a quiet kid, sometimes. Every day I get home from school and watch tv, I get my phone at 7pm for two hours. My stepdad taught me how to fix cars. In the future I want to be in the Navy or a professional boxer. And I want to be rich.

Anonymous – aged 12



# Feedback and learning

*Our starting point in practice is that there will always be ways to do what we do better. We seek feedback from each other and from families regularly and consider that without this, we have no real understanding about the difference we are making.*

*We ask for feedback from families in monthly collaborative reviews of practice, we meet them face to face if they have reason to complain and we ask managers to report on family feedback in their monthly reports. We try to learn from all reviews of our practice. If we get things wrong with families, we offer them kindness and a chance to work through some of the trauma that any poor engagement may have exaggerated.*

## What matters...

We balance difficult feedback with appreciative enquiry

– *it helps us grow as individuals and a service*

We see complaints as the oxygen in our system

– *a clear picture of the change we need*

We are creative, we adapt best practice, don't just adopt it

– *to make it ours*

We invest in skills and training

– *it means continuous improvement flows*

We set our bottom lines – our standards in case work

– *it helps clarify expectations*

We mapped our approach against statutory guidance

– *it gave us confidence, increased the pace of change*

We are open to change and see when we get it wrong

– *it's a sign of strength, not weakness*

## Mas

I'm proud to know Mas. She's a 21-year old mum with an adorable tiny baby, born two months premature. The wee girl is a precious bundle of loveliness. I've worked in children's services for years and have been re-energised by getting to know Mas. Her feedback is like oxygen, it's a stream of fresh air that clears my head and reminds me why I do this job.

But it was hard at first, when she and her personal adviser came to my office with a complaint. It had taken three months to get to that point. Mas is an oldest sister, she'd been a looked after child and was worried about her two younger sisters – who remain looked after – not getting the support they needed. Throughout the pregnancy, she'd been stressed. Then there were problems with her universal credit that meant Mas had to sell her personal things to buy the smallest of babygros, special nappies and other essentials for her premature baby. And we weren't helping the situation.

I felt defensive; why hadn't my managers picked this up? The more I asked, the more defensive I thought the system had become. I had a flashback to when I first joined the council, when the service was failing – people were busy justifying why everything was the way it was, shifting blame to another part of the system and when a difficult question came up, no-one was able to find the answer. There was a sense of anger, staff biting and nipping at each other like pacman in the old computer game and in the middle of the maze was Mas saying, "Hello I'm here, you've got this wrong." It took a moment of reflection to remind myself that our first duty is to look through the lens of the people

we are trying to support – to walk for a moment in their shoes before trying to make any judgement. That’s the empathy I didn’t see we had been able to show.

As a leader you have to get underneath the practice, to see around it and get on top of it. The system has to be better – we have to be better. In the complaint meeting we used a case mapping process, part of our signs of safety approach. I focused on good listening, clarifying points and together we worked through what was happening, the difficult bits and what was working well. It was an honest and open conversation. There were good bits and not so good bits – but it was restoring all of us together. Her feedback gave me a clear picture of what needed to change, and I felt my energy pick up. Mas set some goals to go to college or to become an apprentice and we worked out a plan of action to support her from our end and to make some apology. She brought the baby in to see us yesterday. This mum and her beautiful daughter are both doing well.

“I wanted to be heard, to know you cared,” Mas said. “We feel safe.”

**Jacky Tiotto**

Director Children’s Services

*Complaints give us energy  
– a clear picture of what needs to change*



## **I think we got it wrong**

It was a wet Monday morning. Steve and I were heading off on a two-hour journey to visit a family who had made a complaint about religious discrimination. How mortifying this was for me! I had spent the last 18 years challenging and changing the ethos of our adoption service to one of openness and acceptance. We agreed to explain clearly to John and Mary our reasons for not accepting their application and hope they would be able to see these reasons were in no way discriminatory.

The tone of the email exchange had suggested that we were likely to receive a frosty reception. But as we drove up the long tree-lined drive we spotted John standing out in the rain in his wellies with an umbrella, waiting to escort us into a warm, homely kitchen where Mary had the kettle on.

I had expected the couple to be defensive and challenging; what I found was a couple who were reflective and accepting. As the conversation flowed, I found myself questioning the decision not to proceed. The reason had been based on the couple as a particular resource. They may not have been the resource we first thought but a resource they were - and potentially a strong one.

My brain was processing the information and my gut feeling was kicking in. I looked at Steve, who was clearly sharing my thoughts.

“John, Mary. I think we got it wrong. What do you think about resubmitting your application?”

John and Mary, a little shocked but delighted, agreed to proceed with their application. We left feeling happy that we had made the right decision for the council, for the couple and for any future children who may be placed.

Always be open to changing your mind – it is a sign of strength not weakness!

**Anonymous**

*Changing your mind is a sign of strength*



## Seismic shift

You know those moments? You're in a team meeting talking about a new way of working and you see colleagues making eye contact, a glance that says; here we go again, another strategy person telling us how we should be doing our job.

Another day you're in a room full of senior managers and they just haven't understood it. Or worse, you're in a room on your own, the meeting's been cancelled. Nobody says system change is easy but there's a stubborn part of me that won't be thrown off course.

When we started our change journey the direction was clear. Our leadership team is committed to the principle set out in the Children Act 1989 that the upbringing of children should be in their families, when it is safe enough to do so. We all got that. Our practice would be underpinned and informed by our values, the challenge was how to achieve it.

We started as we meant to go on, modelling what was at the heart of our Signs of Safety approach; collaboration, reflection and open questioning with social workers as the experts in the system and families the experts in their lives.

We inquired about what was working well and how colleagues wanted it to be in future. The conversations were brilliant, but it took the best part of a year to talk to everyone, to unearth the confused bits, to work through the areas where colleagues disagreed. We finally got down on paper what we'd be doing from the front door of the MASH team through the whole system. Senior managers set out their bottom lines. It provided clarity.



That was when I felt a real movement and we picked up speed. The director's energy lifted us. A big and important piece of work was mapping the statutory guidance with our approach, so everyone could see how it aligned. We began implementing Signs of Safety system-wide, every policy, procedure and service evolving in a flow of continuous improvement.

Four years later, we still need to work on depth and consistency, but we are so much better at building relationships that respect and honour families. We deal with the busy-ness and time pressures of our world by working hard yet sustainably in the service of the families. Even our reports are written for families, not with a potential court case in mind.

Things change, people change but this approach is now part of our identity as an authority.

**Becky Hare**

Referral and Assessment Service Manager

*System-wide change means every policy, procedure and service evolves – it takes time*

WE'RE  
DOING SOMETHING  
DIFFERENT !



## A recipe for outstanding leadership

There's a thing in social work and Bexley is no different.  
And that is cake.

Prep time – a lifetime

Cook time – your whole career

Serves – children's services directorate

Calories – let's not go there

### Ingredients:

- Integrity
- Humility
- Commitment and passion
- Listening and communicating effectively
- Building relationships
- Inspiring and motivating others
- Encouraging creativity
- Rewards and recognition
- Championing change

### Method:

Preheat your mindset so you don't lose sight of what's important. Sieve the right priorities into your bowl.

Crack two organic, engaging qualities (we like honest and fair) and add to the mix.

Weigh your remaining ingredients to ensure you have enough bravery, trust and respect.

Measure out a healthy dose of letting people in to help engage your workforce and encourage your cake to rise. Add a tablespoon of humour and a pinch of mucking in to taste.

Whisk together the personal qualities and skills with accountability and responsibility (not power) to achieve a down to earth consistency.

Set to one side and line your cake tin with social work ethics and values to prevent your cake from sticking. Pour your dedication into the tin and set a timer for review.

Use this time to reflect on how you lead by example and promote a learning culture. Check how your cake is doing at regular intervals, recognising its progress and sharing positive feedback. The texture should be supportive and encouraging.

Place your cake on the cooling rack to let it breathe. You now have the option to ice the cake – try adding diverse, innovative and forward-thinking aspects to achieve a high-quality finish.

**Sarah Matton**

Project lead for Signs of Safety

*Listen to understand, not to reply*



## Why we stay

The most rewarding workshop I facilitate focuses on supporting colleagues to deal with secondary trauma. It recognises the emotional impact of helping and supporting people who have experienced trauma and opening ourselves up to the pain of others. It is an occupational hazard of helping and is different from stress and burnout, as those tend to be related to organisational issues, whereas secondary trauma is related to the emotional impact of working with trauma; either repeated exposure or a one-off situation.

My first job as a social worker was in a secure therapeutic treatment facility for teenage boys, all of whom had experienced trauma, neglect, and/or abuse. The ethos of the organisation was that because this was the toughest work we would ever do they would take care of us - so we could take care of the young people in our care.

The workshop I facilitate is about providing information about secondary trauma and its impact, creating a safe space to talk about it, and to help people identify self-care strategies – professionally and personally. I'm always struck by the relief people feel when they realise they are not alone in these feelings and that it's okay to be affected by walking alongside people in pain.

Learning and development opportunities are an essential part of not only creating a skilled and knowledgeable workforce, but of making staff feel valued. Last year we offered 150 learning sessions, ranging from an hour to five days.

In addition to the formal learning offer, the team provides coaching and facilitates learning and “serious success” reviews. The learning reviews help us learn from our practice in a non-threatening, blame-free way and the success reviews help us learn from what worked.

I started in Bexley in 2004, having been recruited from Canada; I had intended to stay for two years. I was here in 2012 when we were judged inadequate by Ofsted. There was no doubt that investment was needed, but what’s impressive is that the investment in staff, learning, and programmes for families has continued despite budget pressures. We’re mindful of the cost and we’ve made savings by sharing the experience and expertise within our workforce.

We annually survey staff on their experience of working in Bexley. When asked the three most important things for them about working here, they consistently say supportive managers, learning and development opportunities, and career progression. Only once in seven years has pay been in the top three.

### **Lori Goossen**

Service Manager - Professional Standards & Quality Assurance and Academy

*Feedback shows just how critical learning and development is to the workforce*



## Growing pains

Getting feedback can feel really scary but when complaints began to be an open learning conversation in the service, we started to see a marked change in how workers responded. We depersonalised the complaints information and worked on understanding the story. We reflected on how to present ourselves to children and their families and reduced our complaints.

When we showcased and nominated our workers for staff awards and had regular appreciative enquiry exercises, morale lifted almost instantaneously. Helping people to understand the difference they were making to children and their families is so powerful.

We also quality assured the recording of practice. This helped us to understand the training needs within the service and through this we worked with the professional standards and quality assurance service to develop a bespoke training programme. The recording framework and expectations became clearer and I would dip sample every aspect of recording until I was confident we'd got it right. My expectation was that audit reports would reflect the change and they did, from 99% inadequate audits to more than 60% good. That was part of my own internal success story.

Observing staff also meant that I began to know each worker's style of practice, I knew the service children and their families were receiving and where it was not where I expected it to be, I would take the steps necessary to make it right.

My greatest learning has been to learn how to reframe the culture and to respect the process of change for the organisation and the people. I had to show up with my vulnerabilities and be clear about the growth I expected of myself.

One of the greatest shifts was when we completed a service exercise where everyone had to share the contribution they were making to the success and the hindrance of the service. This was a tough exercise, with a lot of emotion in the room, but everyone realised then that the service was their responsibility. When they identified a problem they knew they also had to think about what the solution could be.

Confidence, pride and professionalism increased and everyone's contribution was valued. We joined the same page and our journey of improvement officially began.

**Charmaine Malcolm**

Service manager

*Take steps to learn where practice must change then get on the same improvement page*



## Working my way back to Bexley

Trying to get young people into work when they've been disaffected from school is truly like spinning plates – you always need an extra spin here and there, you're constantly watching for the wobbles when they slow up and when you think they are settled, one will drop.

That's what it was like in the Work Internship Network programme which ran for four years under the education business partnership at Bexley. Keeping the young people on track required a lot of creativity, consistency and belief. If they didn't turn up for work, I would go to see them and talk them round and support them in attending that day.

"My black trousers are in the wash."

"Ok, wear your black jeans," I'd reply. "It's fine, your employer would rather you turn up, we'll explain."

Then I'd take them to work and help them see the long-term benefits of sticking with it.

We ran practical courses - first aid, health and safety food hygiene and drama interview workshops – and made different resources to support those with special needs, like laminated mats for revision and mind maps. GCSEs seem so unattainable to some young people, this way they would have qualifications on their CV. I left school myself at sixteen and was lucky to get a job in a bank, I don't think those sorts of opportunities are around these days.



The feedback from the programme was that I never gave up on the young people. Each year up to 98% found employment or training by the end of year 11. Then the Learning and Skills Council funding came to an end in 2013 and I found myself redundant. Although I moved onto other teacher and training jobs my heart was with Bexley Council – and I live next door – so I've been delighted to find a role that connects with my experience and knowledge.

Now I use the same creativity, consistency and belief to support young people leaving care to achieve their goals. I created a mind map that can be used to capture information during the Pathway Plan process. This led to creating a network of support template which is used across the teams and service.

I'm married with three grown up children that I'm extremely proud of. I get the rewards of helping young people to overcome many barriers, get into work and change their lives. It's my life and my career.

**Dawn Mason**

Personal Advisor for Employment and Training Leaving Care Team

*Translate learning from other roles – creativity matters*



## Infectious energy

“Put your hands up if you go to any clubs outside of school.” The entire assembly’s hands shot up, as one. The excited whispers had started.

“Where do you go?” The teacher shouted over the babble, pointing this way and that to get answers.

“Gymnastics.” “Football.” “Dance.” “Brownies.” “Choir practice.” “Poetry club!” Answers bounced back from across the whole room. The anticipation was building. Then the passports flashed up on the screen.

“Ooooooh!”

“We’re going to be doing a few launch activities today, some graffiti, some beatboxing.”

“OOOOOOH!” came back even stronger.

“And what’s more... everyone will go home today with their very own passport,” the teacher added.

That was it. Loud, energetic chatter broke out instantly. Everyone was turning to their friends, talking about all the things they could do together, all the places they could go, all the people they could meet. Pure excitement filled the room. The Children’s University journey in Bexley had begun!

Over 1300 pupils aged between seven and 11 took part in our children’s university pilot across five schools. It was a perfect opportunity to build on the strong relationships we already had with local primary schools, and personally, it was

a chance to be creative and innovative. The idea comes from a national charity but in Bexley we're doing things a bit differently, including intergenerational sessions and employers' workshops. We're taking best practice and enhancing it.

In December we went back to the schools to find out how they felt it had gone. The stamps were a real driver to get children attending. They all knew exactly how many stamps they should have and would track down teachers if their passports hadn't been stamped. This was great, especially when the clubs they were attending included art, science and maths with a direct impact on academic achievement. More importantly, one child said his confidence had grown massively due to the Children's University, something confirmed by his school teacher.

The children drew pictures of places they had been – boxing clubs, the O2 arena, singing in choirs – filled with colourful memories of the journeys that their passports had taken them on. And the excitement caught me, too. I'm learning so much and I can't wait for the next step of the journey, when Bexley children put on their caps and gowns and attend their very own university-style graduation ceremony in July. Definitely one not to miss!

**Dominic Thornley**  
National Management Trainee

*Don't just adopt best practice, adapt it.*



# Voices

## What life is like for me

### **My school years**

When I was at school I had a lot of troubles and couldn't concentrate – because of my past. I was very scared of everyone and it was hard to trust people. I was bullied because I was slightly different to everyone else. I moved schools and got more support in lessons and a mentor, the one-to-one time is what helped me to concentrate.

**Anonymous – aged 16**

### **A day at work**

When I first started my new job, I felt humiliated and afraid. I got lost and asked the men older than me. The worksite looked like a bomb had gone off. There were people everywhere, dust and cranes.

I had to overcome my fear of being the youngest and being picked on. I got over it by being myself and working hard, I am good at my job. I learned that you have to take a risk and it will be fine.

**Anonymous – aged 17**

# Voices

## The life of ginge

My drug habit increased massively when I was 13 because I'd been looked after for so long but still couldn't trust anyone. The only person I was able to trust was my first foster mum, Anne, before she sadly passed away. I'd lived with her for five years.

Getting told the news straight from school broke my heart, to the point that even the smell of fags would remind me of her because she smoked. Going to Anne's funeral at the age of 11 was so hard, because of my age and because she treated me like a son and I saw her as a mother.

I haven't really overcome the fact of losing her but when I miss her I listen to her favourite songs which makes me feel a bit better.

Anonymous – aged 17



# Partnership

*We are a thoughtful partner with others, learning and reflecting on what is working well and what needs to improve. We find time to reflect and recognise that improving our practice with families is not easy and we will make mistakes. That said, we will not judge or blame but rather be honest and transparent with each other, with families and observers, always making a commitment to do the right thing for children and young people.*

## What matters

We are open, accountable, flexible, organic

– *it's all about the outcomes*

We're aiming high, focusing on prevention

– *it's a continuing journey*

We're extending our networks

– *to strengthen support for families*

We listen to the children, their families and carers

– *it's co-production and shared belief in the possibilities we're aiming for*

We've built a shared ethos, a team across boundaries

– *it's an inclusive approach*

We share our worlds and our workings out

– *it builds trust, understanding and the right accountabilities – we understand shared decisions*

We're here because we want to be

– *it's a commitment*

## It's ours

I went to the first meeting of our new children's safeguarding partnership arrangements thinking this'll be okay, we'll design a new system, we'll set out our responsibilities and talk about who does what. I'm an accountant by training, professionally we can be a bit mechanical or procedural, it goes with the territory - and that day I had my corporate head on.

Right from the start though, the approach at Bexley was different. It was an informal/formal meeting that started with the director being open and honest, setting a new tone by saying; "We're here for the children, let's get this right for them." We shifted into a different mindset, we knew what we were there for and agreed that this new shared statutory responsibility would be a genuine joint endeavour.

For the first time ever there was no scrabbling around or politicking about who would chair the new partnership. We decided to share the job, swapping in turn from me - the NHS CCG - to the police to the council. The thinking was, people need to see all our faces, we don't tuck in or hide behind other agencies. Our way would be more organic and flexible.

We all take the lead on a specific priority - ours is parental mental health - and all discuss, support and contribute to each stream of work. We aren't afraid to try something new. Our three agencies appeared in a video about missing children - another of our priorities. The video got mixed reactions, some people loved it and it was widely viewed, others thought we could have included more partners. We captured the learning and will continue to innovate.



We've had some difficult conversations about the money; who can pay for a certain post or how costs might be split, and there are still aspects that trouble us. The hard stuff remains hard, but it doesn't affect our working relationships. Another difference is that we trust each other to be able to take the conversation offline when we need to thrash things out. A couple of times we've said, let's get some fresh air and we've gone into the car park to break through a blockage. We're sensitive to the complexities of each other's worlds.

The DfE validated one of our early meetings which was great. We aren't there because we have to be, we all want to be there. It's not your meeting, or my meeting, it's ours.

**Michael Boyce**

Deputy Managing Director & Director of Quality, NHS  
Bexley CCG

*Partners are open and accountable, flexible and organic, the outcomes matter to all of us*



## Dedicated to fostering

I trained as an electronic engineer and ran many businesses, including a textile factory and a couple of food takeaways. When my wife brought home a leaflet about fostering, we agreed to give it a go. Then a baby arrived from the hospital as an emergency, crying and crying due to drug withdrawal. We fell in love with her.

That was about 13 years ago. Gradually, I gave up my businesses to focus on fostering; it's so important. We have four kids of our own, now in their twenties and thirties, we've adopted one child and have special guardianship of two more. At the moment there are six kids in our house.

People are amazed how calm our house is but it's not what it seems from the outside. Like everything in life you adapt and we've learned the hard way. We're very sensitive to children's needs. When I walk in the door I can sense if there's a problem even before a word has been spoken. I was trained in collaborative and pro-active solutions which helps make sure emotions are regulated and calm before talking to a child about what's happened.

It made a lot of sense to me. My dad was in the army and my mum had three of us at home. If we hurt ourselves or were upset and crying, my mum cried with us. When my dad asked why, she explained that we were too young to understand life, we needed to know that feelings were normal, so if we cried, she cried. We felt understood, cared for and could start to open up.

Being able to talk to children or adults and understand what's going on is a life skill. When I was in business, if something went wrong in the factory, it was usually because as the boss, I was one step removed. I hadn't talked to them, didn't know their experiences and what would work for them.

We've come a long way over the years, so has Bexley. In the past, foster carers had no input at all but children's services is totally different now, going in the right direction – but like everyone, there's still room for improvement. I got involved with the Foster Carers Association and I'm always reminding the social workers about talking to the carers, they are the closest to the child.

I'm 59 now, I don't think of retiring. I'll see it through and try to make a difference.

**Anonymous**

*Listen to the voice of the foster carers – they are closest to the child*



## Making the right choice

My story is set in my office, reading articles about community care on my phone. I wasn't just scrolling; I was reading, getting as much background as I could on the National Assessment and Accreditation scheme (NAAS). I'd been involved in meetings with the director, some managers and the union as there were worries that Bexley's approach might conflict with the national system.

Although there were different views around the table, the meetings were positive and eventually the director agreed a different approach which meant there would be an alternative to NAAS for social workers in Bexley. The end result is that there's now more money to train social workers. The situation is ongoing.

The story is important to me. I felt that even though we may have had a difference of opinion on the matter, there was a mutual respect and concerns were heard. I had a choice of whether to go into politics or social work, whichever way I went, I knew I wanted to make a real change in people's lives. It's why I work in local government.

**Rebecca Marshall**

Senior Social Worker

*Investment in training and development matters*



## Behind the scenes

There's a constant buzz. Radios blaring with incidents and updates. Screens monitor rolling news channels; sometimes Sky or the BBC will pick things up before we do. More screens monitor CCTV and pick out crime hotspots. Everyone is alert, ready to respond. Officers in headsets are focused on 999 calls and 101 and other non-emergency calls come through, too. It's a high-pressured environment. Welcome to the ops room.

I was pleased to show two of our Bexley safeguarding colleagues how things work. It's important that there's no mystery. We've had major organisational changes in the Met Police recently and there's nothing like seeing it for yourself.

I'd joined the Basic Command Unit that covers Bexley, Greenwich and Lewisham five weeks before it went live. It was seriously challenging, bringing together specialists from child abuse and sexual offences teams and existing area-based officers, ensuring they see the three boroughs as one unit. As a command and control organisation, police officers are told where and how they will work, and they do it. But there was still a lot of engagement needed to reach hearts and minds, to build new teams quickly and to show that vulnerable members of the public were getting a better service.

Our tour for our Bexley colleagues moved on to the safeguarding hub. It's an impressive thing to have such expertise and experience under one roof with colleagues tackling child sexual exploitation, domestic violence and

missing children in a joined-up way that's more consistent. Victims don't have to repeat their harrowing accounts and when children and offenders stray across borders, we're ready for it.

Another challenge for me was getting up to speed with the new arrangements for safeguarding in Bexley and establishing relationships with a new set of people. In one of our early meetings there was an awkward question about the level of police funding into the safeguarding partnerships – it's set centrally by the Met and is the same for every borough. Immediately, the council's children's services director stepped in, explaining that funding didn't just mean cash and that the time and commitment of officers to the work in Bexley was far more valuable. That demonstrated true partnership to me. We can't do our job without partners supporting us.

I've been doing safeguarding for 25 years – before it was even called safeguarding. To me this work is really demanding but so important. It's why I joined the force and I'm sticking with it.

### **Detective Superintendent Jim Foley**

Safeguarding lead, SE BCU (Lewisham, Greenwich and Bexley)

*With a true partnership we step in to support each other, understand each other's worlds*



## Actual benefits

One of my greatest achievements as the Young Director for Children's Services was contributing to the council tax exemption for all Bexley care leavers until they turn 26 years old. I'm a care-leaver and my role is an apprenticeship. I kept thinking – what happens when I finish this job, how would I afford to pay council tax? I pushed the idea because it's exactly what I'm there to do – to make sure the voice of looked after children and care-leavers is heard – and the impact is massive.

Most care-leavers are living on £56 a week, £112 for a fortnight in benefits (that's changed with Universal Credit, but let's not go there). To be fair, most of the councillors know that young people don't have enough money and they supported the policy change. It was a real worry off my mind and the young people I spoke to about it were really happy. It showed that Bexley Council is playing its part as our corporate parent.

I've overcome many obstacles in life, both personally and professionally, but I've been fortunate enough to have the right support in place to help me overcome them and learn from them. I'm coming to the end of the year and will be handing over to a new Young Director. I'm proud that I've been able to make a difference to children, young people and adults' lives. And I've been able to go on holiday for the first time and I've paid for it myself. That feels good.



What I'd say to whoever takes on the Young Director role next is; just be yourself and make sure you have young people's interests at heart. Ask questions and remember it's okay to make mistakes, your manager will be there and there are many more people who will support you and who want to help you develop. Bexley is definitely a good place to work in. It starts you off on a journey that takes you to a different place in your life.

**Shannon Lidbury**  
Young Director

*Treat children and families as partners with an equal voice – and leave them better off*



## With thanks

I knew very little about children's services in Bexley before taking on the role of portfolio holder; I'd been in the travel industry most of my life. One of the main lessons that I brought with me from the business world is that you have to ask the hard questions and deal with the consequences. I think criticism is good, you need to know when things aren't working, or you can't put them right.

I didn't want to become an "amateur professional," but I wanted to really understand the process, to see what it was like at the coalface and get to know the staff. Putting in the time is essential to doing the role properly, I reckon I could easily spend 20 hours a week reading reports, articles or research. It allows me to ask what might seem naïve questions, to tease out issues and get under the surface.

I probably bore everyone with this, but my focus has been on getting the right staff in place, with the right training and dedication to deliver change for families. That's the bedrock of the service. We've worked hard to get to a level of 90% permanent staff and I want to see us at 93%.

Bexley has a very real and shared concern for the welfare and development of children and young people, and we understand the impact of family breakdown. I attend team meetings, sessions with foster-carers and families. I've seen how embarrassed parents can be about their need for support and we've all recognised the importance of the wider extended family in finding safe sustainable solutions.

There was a real sense of achievement when we got the Ofsted result. It was one of the most emotional meetings I've ever been to – a lot of moist eyes in the room. The hard work starts now, we can't relax. The next step is prevention, prevention, prevention.

This is the motion I proposed at the council meeting in November last year. It was passed unanimously, and all members stood to give a standing ovation to the children's services staff.

*“This Council is delighted and proud that the recent Ofsted inspection found Bexley’s Children’s Social Care service to be outstanding, and hereby records its appreciation and congratulations to the staff at all levels and in all teams within our Children’s Service for their hard work, dedication and commitment. This is their achievement and we thank them.”*

**Councillor Philip Read**

Lead member for children's services

*Lead members and directors have to share the driving to achieve outcomes*



## The threads that bind

I arrived in Bexley two weeks into the Ofsted inspection. The style of leadership immediately felt inclusive and collegiate, I was involved in every meeting. I saw something special, a system cut like a cloth to meet the needs of the children, young people and families we serve – a warm coat of many colours. Yet I wondered how my leadership would be welcomed. We had received an outstanding judgement and already I could see where improvements could be made.

My approach is built on extensive experience of building community links, working with partners and the voluntary sector and I was sure we could weave a tighter, more cohesive network. No stitch could be missed, every seam overlapped to strengthen the network of teams and agencies. We needed to extend the reach, to midwives and health visitors for example, to find and fix the right connections in academy chains, to widen the net across to neighbouring authorities and small community groups.

One thing we put in place straight away was named social worker champions, experts who were responsible for showcasing best practice across all our teams. I wanted information to flow through and be used across the system in a consistent way. If we picked up a place of interest where gang violence was an issue, we'd be able to use it in our strategic discussions, work with the right people to influence decisions and avoid any gaps. There was already a girls' group for those at risk of child sexual exploitation, but now we've involved others to share the load and the learning, so more staff could help deliver research and mapping.

I was glad that my new leadership colleagues also saw the need to keep our feet firmly on the improvement pedal. And far from sensing a resistance to yet more change after Ofsted, the focus is always on how we can achieve the vision. It's still early days but there's a good fit between me and Bexley.

It's right that children don't stay in our care longer than they need to. Most children don't want to be looked after, they're on social media with their families all the time, some of them catching buses and trains getting back to their family whenever they can. Some councils don't have conversations about how we can help children home. We do. And our teams and extended networks weave together the support to make that possible. There's more magic to be created.

**Fi Cisneros**  
Head of Service

*The more we involve others in our business, the stronger children's outcomes become*



## Less corporate, more parenting

I am very proud to be chairman of the Corporate Parenting Board and actively involved in all we are doing as corporate parents to support our children's services team and the children and young people in our care.

Throughout the year there are many events for our young adults, looked after children and foster carers and I try to attend as many of those that I can to show my interest, appreciation and support.

As always, the annual achievement awards evening, held at the conclusion of our corporate parenting week, had a wonderful atmosphere. The foster carers organised a Hallowe'en party at a local venue – the children were all dressed up and enjoyed the games. At Christmas, there was a party one evening for the young adults at with a quiz, DJ and photo booth and on Christmas Day members of the team put on a special lunch leaving their own families to make sure our young people enjoyed a special Christmas Day.

At the request of our cabinet member, the Corporate Parenting Board is currently looking at independent living, reviewing whether the rented accommodation for our young adults is of an acceptable standard. On the site visits, we are focusing particularly on health and safety issues and it is rewarding to be taking an active part in this. We hope it communicates commitment, that we've taken our corporate parenting role to heart.

The Corporate Parenting Board has learned a lot from our young director, who was a looked after young adult. Her reports are enjoyable to read and help us understand things from the young people's perspective.

Ofsted is constantly raising the bar, so our approach is to identify issues early and take action. There is always more to do, always something new we can put in place, we never sit back.

We are very fortunate in Bexley to have strong and committed leadership with councillors and senior management working together. There's a real ethos of caring and a team spirit and we all have our part to play and it is this that ensures our children and young people for whom we are responsible are well supported.

**Councillor Sybil Camsey**

*Every councillor and every officer has a role to play in the life of looked after children*



## The road to outstanding

It was 1.30pm on 20 July, 2012, and I was sitting in Hill View with the senior children's team listening to Ofsted tell us that we weren't keeping children safe and that Bexley was inadequate. It was one of the hardest things I have ever heard. A stunned silence followed. As a corporate performance manager, I'd seen the warning signs – reports telling us that assessments were taking too long and children weren't being visited – but we were confidently told the data must be wrong. I knew that saying "I told you so" wouldn't help.

For the next 20 months, we had a safeguarding improvement board in place. We saw senior staff, team managers and social workers leaving, new ones starting and then leaving again. Nearly 80% of our posts were covered by temporary workers. We worked hard and when Ofsted visited again on 2 April, 2014, we had scraped over into 'requires improvement' – just. It was a relief, but not good enough.

In 2015, a new director arrived and our improvement journey sped up. We put in a new performance and accountability framework which, although people initially struggled to understand, meant that performance was regularly reviewed and critical strategic and operational topics were discussed. We crafted an improvement plan and reviewed progress regularly. Three years later, expecting another inspection, we began supporting staff to prepare.

On Monday, 2 July, 2018, I arrived at my desk to find I had left my glasses at home. I remarked to a colleague that the last time I'd done this was the 2012 inspection. Two seconds



later, I was told that Ofsted had rung to give us notice! The next day I would be flying to America. I couldn't believe after all the planning that I wouldn't be there with the service.

On Friday, 20 July, 2018, via Facebook, I watched the strangest video of the director and her team “flossing” across the atrium with some young people from St Fidelis School. At 12.30pm that day the inspectors informed Bexley that we were ‘outstanding’. I was sad not to be there but despite being all those miles away, I felt the euphoria. The plans worked. Without proper planning we wouldn't have made it. We in the corporate centre and human resources had played our part in supporting the system to keep children safe.

The work hasn't ended – it feels busier than ever but every so often I stop to look back on our journey and enjoy the view.

### **Lorraine Harker**

Head of children's strategy and operation

*The corporate centre provides practical support to keep children safe, it's crucial*



# Voices

## What life is like for me

### Happy with a twist

This was it, the minute I walked through them gates, I was officially a college student. I couldn't believe it, my head filled with utter chaos. I took two tiny steps forward. Keep calm, I said to myself but all I saw around me was people staring at me.

"He's weird," I heard from the right of me, "He's that care kid," screamed from the left.

Deep breaths, come on you can do this... I kept walking as the world around me turned to slow motion. Then I heard a tiny innocent voice saying, "Don't worry, ignore them, you're not weird, you're just happy with a twist."

That moment was when my confidence grew, and I realised I could only ever be me. So there you go. That's me. Not crazy like some people say, just happy with a twist... nothing more.

**Anonymous – aged 17**

# Voices

## Lights up the place

I'm always happy, everything makes me happy: seeing my friends, going to school, my teachers, doing English.

If I have a problem my family helps me, any of them, they are amazing. My brother tries to wind me up but I just ask and they help. In my family is me and thirteen others, I can't tell you their names because it's a secret. One of us has his birthday on Sunday, so it will be fun. It's nice to have a big family.

I've been coming to Monday club for ages – about 5 years – it's so great. I like Lego and playing tricks on people, like leaving notes with random messages on around the place. See if you can find them.

When I grow up I'd like to look after children, not babies, but like here at Monday club.

**Anonymous – aged 13**



# Getting to the heart of it – book club questions

## For individuals

We hope the stories will help everyone working in children's social care focus on opportunities to shift thinking and challenge behaviours and processes that can block progress for the children and young people in our care. This book isn't about making heroes of the contributors or saying be like them; we all work in different ways. But understanding and reflecting on where you and your teams are in relation to the themes in the book will help you think about change for the better. The questions here are offered as an invitation to help you move forward...

- **What stories stand out** or are most surprising? Notice your own reactions to the pieces – which ones **resonate**, which ones make you think; we could do that? **What inspires you?**
- Which stories most reflect how you see yourself and others at work? Where are your **strengths**? Where might you need to **make a shift**?
- How could you develop the relationships with others that can open up space and generate energy to meet the needs of your teams and the outcomes for children in **your care**?
- What's your experience of **taking a stand**? What leadership behaviours are you modelling? How can you help show that other ways are possible?

- How will you **make sure** you continue to **reflect and learn**, not get more information, but personally **develop and grow** so you know yourself and are able to support others?
- How open are you to hearing and **engaging with feedback** from others – even when it's hard to hear?
- What are **the stories you tell yourself** about your work, how you do it and **why it's important**?
- What stories could you tell your colleagues, your friends, family and communities that **build momentum** towards change?
- What **next steps** do you want to take? What if anything is stopping you from getting started? What can you do to change this?

## For organisations

To make a difference, our organisations also need to stand back and reflect. These stories have implications for leaders and managers at all levels, for long-term strategy and specific policy development. By sharing and discussing the stories collectively, you'll be able to see where there is most potential to make improvements.

- What are your organisation's most important **mindsets, behaviours, culture**, structures or powerful groups? Can you map them objectively? What sits behind these stories that impacts – positively or negatively – on how we improve children's services? How honest and open are you about this?

- How can you **set the expectation** that everyone in the system needs to work in these ways so that they see the outcomes for children and young people are their business? And how can you support colleagues to do this?
- How does your council's **senior management team lead on children's services**? What is its style and culture? What conversations take place about children in your leadership teams?
- What's your recipe for **improving performance**? There are many stories in the book that illustrate organisational and individual barriers being overcome. What are the dominant narratives in your organisation about what works in making change?
- How creative and courageous is your organisation in **working with its partners** on these issues?

We hope the questions here will help you reflect on and strengthen your own practice, existing approaches and your organisation's ambition. Please get in touch if you want to know more or have feedback for us:

LeadershipSupportTeam@bexley.gov.uk

## About Shared Press

### Stories that Matter

Bexley has worked with Dawn Reeves of Shared Press on this project. Shared Press is an independent publisher and social enterprise with a remit to share stories that engage with the sharp edges and messy boundaries of modern life, give voice to new writers who care about ideas and innovation and inspire new creative conversations with readers. We focus on public life and public services.

### About Dawn Reeves – Director

Dawn is a story activist, creative facilitator, public services expert and writer. A former director in a large public sector organisation, she now works with a range of clients looking for creative approaches to making change happen. Her energy and enthusiasm for this work come from a deep curiosity about the world and a drive to collaborate. She's a published novelist, has written for the Guardian and was the writer-in-residence at the Chartered Institute for Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA)

Contact her via [dawn@dawnreeves.com](mailto:dawn@dawnreeves.com)



## More from Shared Press

It's a small list, but it's perfectly formed and it's growing...

*Town Hall – buildings, people and power* (December 2018)

*This Leader Can – make a difference on equalities* (December 2018)

*Boldly and Rightly* – Public Service in Bexley (June 2018)

*We Know What We Are* – Thriller (November 2017)

*Holding Up the Mirror – True stories of public service in a post-truth world* (October 2017)

*Under the skin: Stories about the culture of place for Grant Thornton LLP* (October 2016)

*Walk Tall – Being a 21st century public servant* (May 2016)

*Making Our Mark* (June 2015 plus global edition June 2016)

*Change the Ending* – Flash fiction (September 2014)

*Hard Change* – Thriller (March 2013)

[www.sharedpress.co.uk](http://www.sharedpress.co.uk)



SHOWING YOU  
ALL THE  
GREAT STUFF  
THAT'S GOING ON

FAMILY WELLBEING  
or 3 service, early help

John will  
talk you through  
his case ...

this day...  
what does the  
MEAN...?  
With a family of  
3, with a mum  
who was mentally  
ill with OCD.

OCD is different  
for everyone...

How can we explain  
OCD to the children?  
We need to make it child friendly

OCD doesn't make me  
a bad mum. I still love my  
children VERY MUCH!

for me, it's all about my  
HOME  
& about  
CHECKING  
things...



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a BOO

# BEING BOLD, DOING THINGS differently BUT SAFELY

SRI-LANKAN Family:

Dad's SENSE  
OF SHAME  
MUM  
Kids = incredibly  
Loyal  
& Imbalance of  
POWER in the  
relationship of  
the parents  
will I ever see  
my parents  
again...?

We need  
look ca  
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ending

FAMILY FINDING  
BOOT CAMP

AN ALTERNATIVE  
STRATEGY FOR  
CASE WORKERS

THE IMPORTANCE  
OF FAMILY NETWORK  
MEETINGS  
This works!  
BOLD  
but SAFE!

A NETWORK  
FOR life...  
Not just until  
I'm an  
adult

Loneliness can  
be devastating

SAFETY IS  
TEMPORARY WITHOUT  
HEALING

THERE WILL BE TRAINING IN THIS:

MOBILITY MAPPING

Mapping a person's life,  
exploring networks

+ finding  
people this  
way...

MINDFUL  
POSITIONING



INFO: sometimes  
it's finding  
out about the

REMAIN  
CHILD-

# Getting to the heart of it..

Transforming services for children in Bexley

These true stories chart the journey of Bexley's children's services from a time when significant improvement was required to the point in summer 2018 when Ofsted rated the overall effectiveness of work with families and children as 'outstanding'.

The book is an innovative way to support learning for anyone who wants to make a difference to the lives of children and families. The stories share hopes and fears as well as challenges, but critically they show how Bexley have worked to overcome them and to celebrate success.

The stories are amazing – warm, serious, funny and wise – they illustrate the commitment, hard work, creativity and passion shown in Bexley. They get to the heart of what makes the difference.

*"It's about a strong accountability, underpinned by relentless commitment to do the right things for children and their families. We've learnt that the best way to help others is in authentic relationships that enable change to happen. We respect the wisdom of families, their ability to find solutions and the brilliance of our practitioners and managers who invest in continual improvement. We're stronger together."*

Jacky Tiotto