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Dear Clare

Focused visit to City of London children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to the City of London children's services on 8 and 9 November 2022. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Nicki Shaw and Joy Howick.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for the 'front door', the service that receives contacts and referrals, and at decision-making about child protection enquiries, decisions to step down to or step up from early help, and child in need assessments.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Headline findings

At the last inspection, in March 2020, the overall effectiveness of services was judged to be outstanding. On this focus visit, inspectors found high-quality practice which ensures that children benefit from effective and responsive front door services. Children in need receive the right support at the right time, provided by highly skilled and committed practitioners.

Leaders are creating the right environment for social work to flourish. Social workers benefit from manageable caseloads, leaders are visible and approachable, and supervision is effective in a way that supports staff to drive forward plans for children. Staff have a good range of learning and development opportunities. The City of London has a stable workforce, with very low turnover rates. This means that children are able to form and sustain meaningful, consistent and stable relationships with their workers.

External quality assurance activity and oversight by the Achieving Excellence Board provide additional scrutiny and assurance, supporting effective practice and decision-making for children at the front door.

Main findings

The City of London Corporation provides effective front door arrangements through a multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). Although professionals are not all physically co-located, the service ensures that children receive timely and responsive social work and early help services. Thresholds are clearly understood by professionals. Partners have good access to social work consultation. This helps to ensure that children are referred for the appropriate level of service, and that intervention is timely.

Decisions made by managers in MASH are proportionate to the level of need and risk, and are informed by previous history. Consent from parents is well understood at the front door and is consistently checked by staff and managers. Consent is appropriately overridden when necessary.

When decisions are made to step children's cases down to early help services, children receive high-quality assessments that identify their needs well. This leads to skilful early intervention that improves children's circumstances and prevents concerns escalating.

Children who require statutory services receive a timely assessment of need. Assessments are child-centred, of high quality and clearly identify and analyse risk, need and strengths. This supports effective care planning.

Intervention with children and parents is underpinned by effective use of direct work tools, helping them participate and engage in the assessment process. This helps to ensure that children's wishes and feelings are understood, and that they drive and influence their plans. Overall, assessments seen during the focused visit reflect relational, collaborative, sensitive, thoughtful and skilful social work practice.

Children at risk of harm are identified promptly. Strategy discussions are timely and are well attended by multi-agency professionals. This ensures that effective information is shared in order to inform risk assessments, so that prompt decisions and actions can be made to safeguard children. Records of strategy discussions are comprehensive and include clear rationale for the decisions made. Where protective measures have been used, intervention is appropriately authoritative, and is balanced with demonstrably supportive and humane practice.

Visits to children known to both early help and children's services are timely and purposeful. Practice is informed by a relational approach which supports trusting relationships and meaningful engagement, so that children and families can share information about their experiences. The recording of visits reflects the child's circumstances and lived experiences, really bringing the child to life. This will enable children who want to access their records in later life to benefit from a comprehensive understanding about their histories, and of how and why decisions were made about their care and futures.

An annual survey commissioned by the City of London to ascertain the views of parents indicates that families receiving help feel understood and listened to by practitioners.

Managers provide high-quality management oversight. Direction is consistently recorded at referral and allocation stages, and following the completion of children's assessments. Supervision records are comprehensive, with evidence of reflection and hypothesising, and with a focus on reviewing previous actions and identifying next steps to ensure that children's plans progress and that their needs are met.

Leaders use intelligence and data from partners well to inform a multi-agency response to risk of extra-familial harm. For example, the work in Multi-Agency Child Exploitation meetings is used effectively in order to track emerging themes that happen in the City of London. The co-chairing of this meeting by the police and children's services, with good attendance from other agencies, has allowed partners to develop creative ways of identifying and dealing with a range of issues, and to tackle complexity as early as possible in order to better protect the most vulnerable children. This includes responding to low-level gang activity in order to prevent concerns escalating and identifying children who are vulnerable to trafficking.

The local authority designated officer provides a robust service, taking a forensic approach to analysing current and historical information, and making timely and effective decisions. The designated officer also provides skilled professional challenge to organisations when necessary.

The local authority and the safeguarding partnership are exploring innovative ways to raise awareness of private fostering in the area, given the very low number of referrals. This work is ongoing and subject to monitoring and review through the partnership board.

The City of London commissions its out-of-hours emergency service from a neighbouring local authority. The service was not tested fully during the focused visit because there have been few out-of-hours referrals within the timeframe of the visit.

Social workers spoke very positively about working for the City of London. They described leaders and managers as being visible, approachable and supportive. Social workers have manageable caseloads. Staff have access to a wide range of learning and development opportunities, and they can take on lead roles to develop knowledge and skills in a specific area of practice.

Leaders have addressed the two areas of practice identified at the last inspection as needing improvement. Robust systems and processes are now in place to ensure that families stepped down to early help receive support within a timescale that is right for them, and management decision-making is now being recorded at all stages of the child's journey.

Good political and corporate support for children's services has helped children's leaders deliver a remarkable service to Afghan children and families through their

resettlement programme. The co-location of the early help lead, adviser for early years and social work managers supports timely and effective communication, and consultation between services. This strength of joint working underpins effective support being provided for the children and families. For example, leaders liaised extensively with partners to quickly coordinate and mobilise services, including deploying a dedicated early help practitioner to support the Afghan children.

The creative and innovative partnership also created a bespoke learning centre and a play centre for over 320 children within one week of the children arriving in London. The council and its partners worked collaboratively to secure education provision for all school-aged children, in time for them to start the new school term alongside their peers.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning the next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Nicki Shaw
His Majesty's Inspector