

23 August 2021

Florence Kroll
Director of Children's Services
Royal Borough of Greenwich
35 Wellington Street
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Dear Florence,

Focused visit to the Royal Borough of Greenwich children's services

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Young People's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic.

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to the Royal Borough of Greenwich young people's services on 13 and 14 July 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Steve Lowe and Tracey Ledder.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for young people who are aged between 15 and 18 and subject to child in need plans, child protection plans or receiving a specialist service.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. However, the delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. The lead inspector and the director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19. Inspectors were on site for the entire visit.

Headline findings

The Royal Borough of Greenwich has an increasing proportion of children who are aged 15 to 18. This cohort of children presents significant and complex challenges. Senior leaders have responded well and strengthened their performance since the previous inspection of 2019. Low caseloads and reflective supervision create a solid foundation for social workers to develop good practice and have a positive impact on children's lives.

Senior leaders and partner agencies have created sophisticated and effective systems to address risks to children outside of their family home, including knife

crime and exploitation. This is enhanced by specialist provision to combat domestic abuse, through a compassion-based approach to reducing conflict in families. Some elements of practice are inconsistent across the service, but senior leaders have clearly identified these areas and have plans in place to effect changes.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Contingency planning for children in need of protection.
- The full consideration of family history when children have been subject to repeat plans.
- Engagement with children. For example, the use of children's interests to build positive relationships.

Main findings

Partnerships across the Royal Borough of Greenwich have responded well to the restrictions and challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of the staff have been directly affected by bereavement and loss. Senior leaders have adapted working conditions with compassion while retaining a focus on the most vulnerable children. Support for the children has been maintained and a safe system to have staff in key buildings was swiftly put in place.

Social workers are having a positive impact on children's lives in most cases. Comprehensive assessments are consistently underpinned by theory and clearly identify risks and strengths in families. The risks to each child in the family are articulated well and recommendations for actions are tailored to individual needs. For adolescents, social workers are aware of how being out of school, alongside poor mental health and conflict in the home, are key factors in making them vulnerable to exploitation. Analysis and planning are individualised effectively to account for these needs, particularly given the effects of isolation through several lockdowns.

Thresholds are thoroughly understood and applied consistently well. Where the right balance of care and control is vital, social workers increasingly make use of a range of specialist and early help services to strengthen relationships between young people and their parents. The programme for parents of adolescents is particularly effective in giving families the tools to sustain these changes. When risks increase, most children's cases are appropriately stepped up to statutory intervention with legal advice. When risks reduce, families are given tapered support until services are no longer required.

Visits to children on child protection plans and on child in need plans have been prioritised and maintained. A mix of video calls and virtual meetings and effective work with partner agencies has allowed social workers to maintain contact with children and develop new opportunities to engage with them.

Children's voices, interests and aspirations for the future are largely included in plans, reviews and reflected in management decisions. Social workers are genuinely interested in children and try hard to build strong relationships with them. Increasingly, plans are SMART, with clear outcomes identified. Partner agencies attend and contribute to multi-agency meetings.

Social workers in the disabled children's team clearly place the child at the centre of practice in the context of the wider needs of the family. Social workers respond quickly to what could be minor requests where this will have a positive impact for children. For example, a social worker set up an answering service for a parent, improving attendance at medical appointments which had been a worry for professionals.

This practical and time-sensitive approach is not as well replicated in all other teams. Children's and parents' voices being at the centre of planning is not always clear in child protection conferences, especially when they do not attend the meetings. This results in unrealistic targets being set for both children and parents. For this group of children, where it is crucial that they can see they are making progress, global, long-term objectives feature too heavily as opposed to smaller achievable steps.

When social workers are struggling to support children who are at risk, there are often missed opportunities to 'find the hook' to engage them, despite the involvement of several professionals. This results in delay and plans being made solely with parents. In several different case records, social workers highlight children's interests, such as horses and bike riding, boxing and trips to the seaside. Social workers too often lack the confidence to use these interests and opportunities to forge relationships.

There is a small minority of children who have been receiving services over many years and prior to the pandemic, with no discernible impact. More assertive practice in recent months addresses historic delay with pre-proceedings and more robust child protection planning is starting to make a difference. In weaker practice, there is a missed opportunity to reflect on past interventions where there was insufficient change and what could be tried that is different, focused and impactful.

Issues related to race, religion and culture are described well by social workers but not always considered in relation to risk and planning. In some examples, such considerations are captured in plans and analysis, but this is inconsistent. This is particularly important when children are clearly struggling with their identity and it is a key factor in the choices they make.

Contingency planning is weak, especially in more complex cases where children are going missing, or relationships are breaking down at home. Too often social workers and their colleagues concentrate on formulating a single safety plan, without due consideration of parallel options that can be put in place quickly when situations do, or do not, change.

The Royal Borough of Greenwich continues to support an effective and impactful service where conflict and violence in families can be understood and resolved at an early stage. This is achieved by giving both parents and children building blocks to achieve a sustainable resolution. Often this work is with families that would not otherwise receive a service through child and adolescent mental health services or those subject to a statutory plan. This has reduced the need to bring adolescents into care. Parents and children have their own individual workers, allowing more time to reflect on their personal triggers and underlying reasons for conflict. A mantra of 'the problem is the problem not the person' has informed the thinking of other teams. Highly trained practitioners are tenacious and creative in finding a way to engage with children and then bring the family together to resolve conflict.

Greenwich Risk, Adolescent, Safeguarding & Prevention demonstrates a strong, multi-agency commitment to bringing together key professionals to address safeguarding in its broadest sense. Senior operational leaders from the police, housing, community safety, youth offending service, health and community trusts meet weekly to share information and consider children of concern. The approach is highly effective. For example, serious and widespread concerns for a group of eight children were linked together, leading appropriately to a complex strategy meeting and successful disruption activity to reduce risk to them. Social workers add the shared intelligence to real time safety plans.

Management oversight of practice is regular and reflective. Social workers see this as a positive and supportive process and case records reflect detailed analysis of presenting and predicted risks for adolescents. Managers, including heads of service, have remained available and accessible throughout COVID-19 restrictions.

Group supervision and a panel dedicated to 'stuck cases' add extra checkpoints for practitioners to reflect on how to try something new with families where there are complex risks. A tapestry of case audits, case supervision and case tracking gives senior leaders a clear picture of the quality of practice and emerging trends. Auditors know what good looks like when they look at a child's circumstances in detail. Senior leaders utilise quarterly, monthly and weekly reporting well, and use this information to focus on very specific areas of practice.

Training has been moved largely to online but is linked to the relationship-based model of practice and social workers easily articulate what a positive difference this makes to their practice.

Social workers spoke highly of the good support that they get from both senior and team managers, especially in the context of COVID-19. Similarly, through serious and difficult situations, senior leaders communicate with staff quickly and effectively. They show compassion and care to staff and families. Learning from these incidents is firmly embedded in the culture of the organisation.

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

Your sincerely

Steve Lowe
Her Majesty's Inspector