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Dear Mr Browne

Focused visit to Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council children's services

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children'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 Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council children's services on 23 and 24 June 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Alison Smale, John Roughton and Rebecca Quested.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for the protection of vulnerable children from extra-familial risk.

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 primarily on site.

Headline findings

Vulnerable children in Solihull are cared about and well protected from extra-familial risks. The approach to exploitation reduces risk to the most vulnerable young people but the response to children going missing needs to be improved. Leaders have been creative and proactive in ensuring children receive the right support at the right time. Children benefit from well-trained and effective practitioners, supporting children and their families based on strong professional relationships and strength-based practice. A well-embedded culture across the partnership recognises vulnerable children as

victims. Staff working with exploited children positively encourage children's engagement with support services. A new exploitation strategy enables young people up to the age of 25 to benefit from continued support into adulthood, but it is too early to see the impact of this.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Timely referral to the missing triage to ensure consideration is given to safeguarding, mapping activity and return home interviews for every child who goes missing.
- The quality of return home interviews.
- The accessibility of documents to staff on children's records, including exploitation screening tools and return home interviews on children's files.

Main findings

The local authority has ensured that social workers continue to respond effectively to the needs of vulnerable children and families during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Children have continued to benefit from face-to-face contact and support from social workers. Leaders are aware that caseloads vary considerably between teams and are too high in some locality teams, where demand has increased. Greater volume and complexity of need for children's social care has resulted in agreement by senior leaders to increase capacity to meet demand.

Early help family support workers understand extra-familial risks to children and ensure children and their families receive the right support at the right time.

Partner understanding of exploitation and completion of an exploitation screening tool strengthens referral information. This helps prompt threshold screening and prioritisation in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). Children who are at risk or are being exploited are identified and action is taken promptly to reduce risk. Managers clearly articulate the rationale for decision-making. The volume and complexity of referrals has increased significantly. Leaders are aware that pressure on allocations out of MASH for assessment has affected the workflow and timeliness within the MASH service overall. Consequently, there have been delays, which for a very small number of children resulted in their needs escalating before they received a fuller assessment of their needs and the right support.

Strategy meetings share information and deliver effective plans to protect children at risk of exploitation. A lack of health participation in these meetings has been recognised and as a result a MASH health-worker post is being created. Participation in strategy meetings by a member of the exploitation team strengthens risk assessment and planning, ensuring that effective safeguarding action is taken.

Social workers get to know children well, spending time listening to and acting on their views. There is a strong ethos across the service of caring for children and wanting the best outcomes for them. Social workers ensure children receive the right help to reduce risks and meet their needs. However, some assessments and plans are not sufficiently holistic, with focus limited to the specific area of extra-familial abuse. This masks the broader positive work to address wider needs those social workers are doing with partners, making a real difference for children and families. While the exploitation screening tool is well completed at the start of work with children, it is not always updated to inform key decisions. The recording system used means it is very difficult for workers and managers to access completed tools once they are saved. This means it is challenging to access key information and they are not able to accurately benchmark children's progress in their assessments. Not all cases have an up-to-date case summary or closure summary. This can make it hard to immediately see what the up-to-date situation is for the child.

The inclusion of specialist exploitation social workers in teams means that children and families benefit from an experienced practitioner who understands exploitation and can intervene effectively and sensitively. The multi-agency adult and child exploitation (MAACE) meetings take place regularly and ensure systematic and effective planning across agencies, which reduces risk of exploitation over time. Very positive outcomes are achieved for many children, which reduce risks and increase their self-esteem, and improve relationships with their family, self-confidence and understanding of exploitation. Children and families value the support they have received and the positive change they have achieved.

A small separate specialist exploitation team provides advice and support to social workers and undertakes some direct work with children and their families. These workers are extremely knowledgeable and skilled in the work they do. They work effectively to reduce risk using a range of strength-based approaches. Partnership work is strong. As a result, risk is reduced, and intelligence is gained to prosecute and disrupt exploiters and abusers. Use of the national referral mechanism is well embedded across the service to ensure that children and young people benefit in terms of enhanced protection, including use of child exploitation defence to avoid exploited children being prosecuted in criminal cases.

The offer to vulnerable homeless 16- and 17-year-olds has improved since the last inspection. Effective systems are in place to ensure young people understand their right to become looked after and reduce risks of extra-familial abuse.

Concerns about the small number of children who are at risk of female genital mutilation, honour-based violence and forced marriage always result in a multi-agency strategy meeting to share information and inform effective next steps across agencies. Actions are based on sound assessments and plans to protect children. Intervention is culturally sensitive, alongside effective action to safeguard children and plan sustainably for their future well-being.

The response to children going missing is not fully embedded. The recent implementation of a missing triage system is starting to improve this. Leaders and managers have not ensured that guidance is always followed, and this means that a minority of children are not referred to the missing triage and consequently do not receive a return home interview by the externally commissioned service. The quality of these return home interviews is not well recorded in children's files and it is not sufficiently clear whether they have taken place. Steps to mitigate risks are not always considered or clearly recorded. Better-quality interviews were undertaken by the exploitation team with young people who had refused to engage with the commissioned service. This means there is not yet complete management oversight through performance reports of all children who go missing. This means they cannot be assured that all children who go missing are receiving the right support to reduce risks at the earliest opportunity.

Authoritative action is taken to protect children when concerns escalate and risks are too high for children to remain in the community. This includes using care, or in a small number of instances secure orders, to protect children. Children in care benefit from targeted direct work to help them understand exploitation and risks. When children are placed out of area for their own protection, there is no loss of focus on their needs. Careful placement planning for children moving on from secure settings is done with the young person where possible, to support positive transitions and safety planning to reduce the risk of returning to exploitative relationships. Care leavers at risk of exploitation benefit from continued oversight, support and scrutiny, with MAACE arrangements helping to advise and inform support.

Leaders have been creative and effective in strengthening their approach to addressing exploitation risks in the community. Strong partnership working, the development of a 0-25 exploitation strategy with partners including adult social care, supporting tools and a culture which successfully engages with children as victims, are having a positive impact for vulnerable children and families. A range of performance reports and forums help leaders to understand the volume of need, but do not show the impact of services for children and families. Performance reports do not sufficiently reflect the strong quality of work and the positive results being achieved to reduce risk of exploitation for children. A comprehensive new audit system is being implemented, but because it is new does not yet provide a full overview of the quality.

Social workers enjoy working in Solihull and feel well supported by their managers and teams. They receive a range of training and development opportunities to enhance their skills and expertise. Social workers benefit from regular supervision, which helps to progress plans for children. It is a strength that independent reviewing officers provide an effective and additional level of frontline oversight for children on child protection plans and in care, and where necessary escalate concerns to ensure children's needs are well met.

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

Your sincerely

Alison Smale
Her Majesty's Inspector