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Dear Ann

Focused visit to Haringey local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to the London Borough of Haringey children's services on 17 and 18 December 2019. The inspectors were Brenda McLaughlin, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Kate Malleson, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors considered the local authority's arrangements for the 'front door'. They evaluated the quality of help and protection provided to vulnerable children and their families in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) and in the assessment teams. A range of evidence was considered during the visit, including discussions with social workers and their managers. Inspectors considered in detail children's cases and met with managers to discuss revised strategies intended to improve the response to vulnerable adolescents and children who experience long-term neglect. They also spoke to managers responsible for providing early help to vulnerable children. In addition, inspectors considered local authority performance management information and read reports on the impact of recent audit activity.

Overview

Senior managers and leaders have an accurate and comprehensive understanding of the complex demands presented by a highly mobile and diverse local community in an inner-London borough with high levels of need. The director of children services (DCS) has taken a carefully considered and mature approach to achieving sustainable change. Following a thorough analysis of the weaknesses in practice, the DCS and with her assistant director are working determinedly to systematically improve services for their most vulnerable residents. They are

creating a social care practice environment of high support and respectful challenge. Leaders are tackling staff competence issues and helping social workers and their managers develop the requisite skills to take forward essential improvements more quickly. They are establishing strong foundations to ensure that the children supported across all teams consistently benefit from services that make a difference to their lives.

A culture of professional curiosity and child-centred practice in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) and assessment service is leading to tangible improvements for children and young people. Many of these children and young people have experienced multiple deprivations, including living in neglectful situations for many years. Most social workers act swiftly to address the harm caused to children living daily with the consequences of poor parental mental health, adult substance misuse or where there is high incidence of parental violent conflict. Increasingly, children in need of early help and protection benefit from strong, child-focused, purposeful and timely direct work.

Leaders are aware that they have more to do to embed the recent changes they have made. More work is needed to further support vulnerable adolescents, those who are criminally exploited and those who go missing from home and care. Rigorous analysis of performance information and recent changes to quality assurance arrangements are positive. However, leaders recognise that they need to enhance their oversight of progress to also develop a culture of consistently measuring the impact on children's experience and progress.

While having some success, leaders have struggled to sufficiently recruit and retain staff. Leaders are diligent about considering reasons why recruitment remains so difficult, including the remuneration packages offered by neighbouring local authorities.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice:

- the recruitment and retention of permanent social workers and managers
- work to support and protect vulnerable adolescents who go missing, including those who are criminally and sexually exploited
- the quality and effectiveness of case management oversight and supervision by team managers in the assessment teams
- the impact of audit and quality assurance arrangements.

Findings

Contacts and referrals for children who are in need or at risk are managed promptly in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). A clear system to track referrals, aligned with effective management oversight, ensures that work is

followed up with the right sense of urgency. Timescales for decisions being made are good. Workers in the MASH are clear about their roles and responsibilities. Agency checks are thorough. Consent is appropriately considered, and there is a clearly recorded rationale when it is overridden. Senior leaders are working proactively with other professionals to augment information-sharing. For instance, the introduction of a daily MASH meeting is intended to enhance multi-agency decision-making and planning for individual children.

The co-location of a social work-qualified early help team manager and dedicated social worker based in the MASH 'early help hub' is a significant strength. Although it has only been in operation since August 2019, children who do not require a statutory service benefit from the immediate help given, and this is preventing concerns from escalating. This is an important improvement, as some children requiring early help had previously waited too long. Threshold decisions made by appropriately qualified early help staff mean that concerns are better understood, and, as a result, children receive the right level of help and protection at the right time. Managers advised that the quality of practice in the newly restructured early help locality service is improving, but from a very low base. A new assessment model and a new well-being model are being implemented, but it is too soon to fully evaluate their impact on children.

Multi-agency strategy meetings are timely and are well attended by a range of professionals. They are well supported by dedicated administrators, are convened quickly and result in swift actions and plans. Child protection enquiries are generally thorough. Medicals completed by paediatricians inform decisions about the required actions to protect children. In most cases, there is evidence of management oversight, including a helpful level of case direction. Children are seen and are seen alone. Appropriate action is taken to safeguard and protect children, including, where appropriate, emergency applications to the family courts to remove children from situations of immediate harm.

Children benefit from timely assessments that demonstrate a good grasp and overview of many of the issues affecting them. Careful account is taken of family history, and efforts are made to understand the impact of mental illness, poverty and domestic abuse. More work is needed to raise awareness of the impact of parental cannabis use. This is too often ignored or minimised in assessments. Direct work with children, using a range of tools to ascertain their views and assess risk, is becoming increasingly evident. Although still not used consistently enough, the recently implemented tool to measure the pervasive impact that neglect has on children's lived experiences adds value to social workers' analysis of the ability or inclination of parents to make and sustain change. Inspector saw examples of tenacious and respectful work to challenge disguised compliance by parents. Case work capacity in the assessment teams fluctuates as demand for services increases. Managers have taken decisive action and are actively recruiting an additional social work team. This demonstrates their commitment to keeping caseloads low.

Social workers report that they are well supported by accessible and visible managers who sit alongside teams. These managers are constantly available to talk about children and debrief staff when they return from visits to families. Clear management direction at the point of allocation in the assessment teams means that social workers understand what they need to do during the assessment period. Although most social workers in the assessment team receive regular monthly supervision, the records do not always reflect strong management review or analysis of children's experiences. More work is required to ensure that supervision provides a continuous evaluation of whether children's experiences are understood and to ensure that interventions are making a difference to helping and protecting them from harm. Actions by managers to provide routine review and written evaluation during the assessment period is intended to strengthen management grip on progress.

Services to help and protect young people who are vulnerable to exploitation and serious violence in Haringey are beginning to improve. Underpinning the local authority's work is an imaginative multi-agency approach that requires further development. This revised model for change in Haringey is designed to tackle the causes of disproportionate exclusion (fixed term and permanent), as well as poorer attainment levels of black boys and pupils with special educational needs. Priority is given to reducing the impact of gang activity and serious violence on young people's education outcomes. Specific local ethnic communities whose young people are known to be at higher risk of experiencing or perpetrating serious youth violence benefit from having dedicated access to the safe spaces and resources of the youth service.

Young people can access a wide range of targeted services, including those to promote psychological and sexual health. This enables and encourages these young people to form helpful and trusted relationships with skilled youth workers and other professionals to reduce their levels of vulnerability, including vulnerability to extra-familial harm. Teachers and social workers have benefited from targeted training, enabling them to identify and act to protect exploited young people sooner. A well-attended multi-agency exploitation panel supported by corporate investment in expanded youth service provision is evidence of the high priority given to addressing the significant problem of exploitation and youth violence in the borough. Some young people who go missing are sensitively engaged in return home interviews where they feel safe enough to provide information about their harmful experiences.

Scrutiny of the daily performance information in the MASH and assessment teams ensures that dips in timeliness of statutory visits or completion of key tasks are quickly identified and addressed appropriately at team and individual level. Regular, themed multi-agency and routine case audits provide essential information on the quality of social work practice. Senior leaders are acting to ensure that auditors measure improvements in children's lived experiences, and not only whether processes are being followed.

Senior leaders are acutely aware that the Haringey workforce is one of their most valuable assets and are working diligently to support, train and recruit permanent staff. Recruitment and retention of staff is a high priority, but agency staff rates remain very high. The local authority has had several successes, including a number of agency staff converting to permanent positions. In a highly competitive recruitment context, leaders are not complacent. They have acted to 'grow your own', have recruited several newly qualified staff and have more taking up post in February 2020. These staff are supported well, caseloads are manageable and staff morale is good. The recruitment and retention of more experienced staff remains a considerable issue. A diverse workforce at every level in children's services is a key strength, enabling better engagement with children and their families.

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

Yours sincerely

Brenda McLaughlin
Her Majesty's Inspector