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Mr Nick Ireland
Acting Strategic Director of People Directorate
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Dear Mr Ireland,

Focused visit to London Borough of Sutton children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to the London Borough of Sutton children's services on 26 and 27 June 2018 carried out by Caroline Walsh and Marcie Taylor, Her Majesty's Inspectors.

Inspectors evaluated the local authority's arrangements for the protection of vulnerable adolescents. They considered a range of evidence, including children and young people's records, held case discussions with practitioners and social workers and observed a professional's multi-agency meeting. Inspectors also reviewed local authority performance management and quality assurance information.

Overview

The commitment of the London Borough of Sutton to children's services is clear and demonstrable. There have been continued improvements in the quality of practice for children, despite senior leadership changes. A recent restructure, leading to the integration of early help and children's social care, with a strong focus on early intervention and prevention, is proving to be effective in reducing risks to children. Restorative practice is being rolled out across the borough and this is resulting in creative approaches to identify vulnerable adolescents and provide effective help for them. Collaboration between services is particularly successful with those children and young people who are harder to engage. Good use of professional expertise informs work with children and families, making a positive difference to these children's lives. Arrangements for protecting children at risk of sexual exploitation are well established and effective.

Senior leaders and managers have a clear vision for their services and know what still needs to be improved. They recognise that the identification and response to criminal exploitation and gangs is at an early stage of development. The assessment of risk needs to be more widely explored for some children and young people. Return home interviews are not consistently used to inform safety planning, and the routine mapping of themes and potential networks is an ongoing area for development. Good progress has been made in stabilising the workforce, but children experience too many changes in social workers. There are several transition points in children's lives, and this creates instability, especially when they become children in care. This instability worsens when children need to move home, as it can take too long to organise their new education provision.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Return home interviews are not consistently informing safety planning for children. Arrangements for children who live out of borough are not timely and the oversight of children who go missing is not sufficiently robust to ensure that all children are offered a return home interview.
- The assessment of risk is fragmented, which means that the wider context of harm in relation to gangs and criminal exploitation is not always well understood or sufficiently considered in safety planning.
- When children in care move home or are not in education, it takes too long for their educational needs to be met.

Findings

- A strong early intervention and prevention approach, using restorative practice, is helping to identify vulnerable adolescents early. Targeted youth support provides flexible, child-focused interventions that support young people to remain at home where possible. When risks increase for children, there is proportionate and effective child protection action. Good use of legal applications ensures that children at greater risk are appropriately supported through becoming looked after.
- Vulnerable adolescents benefit from the co-location of youth offending with targeted youth and leaving care services. Good information sharing and collaborative work around risk, particularly for those young people who are harder to engage, is starting to make a difference. Creative and innovative solutions are emerging and these are improving children's and family's circumstances. For example, a support group for unaccompanied young people is building their support networks, thereby reducing isolation and increasing their confidence and resilience.
- Out-of-hours services are effective. Children's risk is appropriately analysed, resulting in timely, appropriate responses to children in crisis or children who go

missing. Clear recommendations for action enable the day staff to respond quickly.

- Social workers and practitioners are knowledgeable and passionate about the children they work with. They are persistent in engaging vulnerable adolescents and delivering sensitive and child-focused interventions. Most of the assessments and plans considered by inspectors were responsive to risk and reflect the depth of understanding that staff have about the children they are supporting. In a very small number of cases, risk needs to be considered in a wider context for vulnerable adolescents.
- Management oversight and supervision is largely effective, and clear case direction appropriately progresses children's plans. Managers recognise that this is not consistently seen in all cases.
- Senior managers have recently restructured children's services to improve the continuity of care for children and young people. However, senior managers are aware that there are still too many transition points. Children in care experience several changes in social workers, creating instability for them. This uncertainty is exacerbated when children need to move placements and/or change schools. For a few children, it takes too long to ensure that their educational needs are met when they move.
- Leaders invest in commissioning a range of support for vulnerable adolescents and families, helping children to develop positive relationships and build resilience. This support increases their engagement with services and for some children has been significant in reducing risks.
- Inspectors found high-quality children's homes provision for very vulnerable adolescents who were needing to be placed out of borough for their protection. Effective placement support is having a particularly positive impact to reduce risk for these children.
- Specialist support is used effectively to inform the help provided for children. Family support and social workers, clinical psychologists and speech and language therapists work as integrated teams. As a result, they are better able to identify the needs of children and families and deliver trauma-informed interventions. This is leading to more consistent and effective support to children, as well as greater knowledge and skills among the workforce.
- The identification of vulnerable adolescents at risk of sexual exploitation is established and effective. A range of multi-agency panels lead this important work and support partnership working. Coordinated activity with partners has been successful in reducing risks for very vulnerable adolescents, with appropriate use of disruption and protective action. Senior leaders are aware that links to wider criminal and gang exploitation are not sufficiently developed in the analysis of risk for vulnerable adolescents. Risk assessment tools are overly focused on sexual

exploitation, and the overlap and correlation of links with missing and criminal exploitation requires further development.

- There is insufficient senior oversight of the effectiveness of the arrangements for children who go missing from home and care. Not all children who go missing are offered return home interviews, and there are delays in the interviews being undertaken. This delay limits their effectiveness and impact in informing safety planning. Routine mapping of children who regularly go missing is not systematic, and the holistic assessment of their risks needs greater focus.
- Arrangements and practices for responding to radicalisation and female genital mutilation are appropriate and timely. Inspectors found timely referrals and responses that demonstrate successful awareness raising and partnership work with schools and other agencies. Risks to children are well managed and evidence successful interventions, and, in the case of female genital mutilation, the appropriate use of legal orders.
- Leaders and managers are responsive to practice issues. They successfully respond to emerging risks around self-harm and suicide, making good use of their established partnerships with local agencies. The effective mapping of vulnerable adolescents, and concerted efforts to manage risk, have been successful in reducing numbers of children presenting as high risk.
- Quality assurance systems are developing, and case audits are used well to provide feedback about practice. Not all audits seen comprehensively identified improvements or were sufficiently focused on outcomes.
- Senior leaders have invested in workforce developments which are increasingly successful in attracting staff. Vacancy levels are reducing, and staff report that they enjoy working for the authority. Caseloads are regularly monitored to identify pressure points, and staff report that they are mostly manageable. This means that practitioners have capacity to build trusting relationships with children and young people.

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

Yours sincerely

Caroline Walsh
Her Majesty's Inspector