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Dear Ana

Focused visit to London Borough of Wandsworth 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 Wandsworth children's services on 14 and 15 July 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Andy Whippey and Sarah Canto.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need and children subject to a child protection plan.

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 (DCS) agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19. Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including children's and young people's records, and held case discussions with practitioners and social workers. Inspectors also reviewed local authority performance management and quality assurance information.

Headline findings

There is a strong commitment and investment from politicians and senior leaders across the council and partners to bring about positive change for children. Despite the challenges of COVID-19, services have been agile and responsive to the needs of

children and their families. Improved collaborative working and communication are evident with partners. Strong partnership working is evident on children's records.

While more work needs to be done to ensure that all children receive a consistently good service, there has been a determined focus on the improvements necessary. Senior leaders and managers, well led by the DCS, have a clear vision for their services, actively promote high-quality practice and know what needs to be further improved.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Tracking and monitoring of children subject to the pre-proceedings phase of the Public Law Outline.
- Consistency and quality of supervision.
- The recording of how and when actions to progress child in need and child protection plans are undertaken and completed.

Main findings

There has been a high rate of COVID-19 infection in Wandsworth. The local authority, along with its partners, has planned and delivered a well-coordinated and effective response to the pandemic. Its actions have been timely and well considered, with an appropriate focus on supporting the most vulnerable. Despite the wider challenges presented by the pandemic, investment and support for children's services have been consistently prioritised. Partners feel listened to and their views valued. They report feeling more a part of the safeguarding system than they have done previously.

In the main, assessments are thorough and have a clear focus on need and risk. Identity needs are well considered and good use is made of historical information to inform the outcome. Children's views and their experiences are evident in assessments. Consideration of the individual support needs of children and parents, including fathers, is detailed in assessments and work considers the needs of both children and adults to support sustainable positive change for children.

Plans have an appropriate focus on children's needs and address any risk factors; they contain relevant interventions to help both children and adults. They articulate desired outcomes well. In a minority, they could be smarter, particularly in terms of being more specific and containing timescales as to how and when desired outcomes are going to be achieved.

There is some variability in the frequency and quality of both core groups and child in need reviews. They are well attended by partners, who engage effectively to provide support to children and their families. For most children, this means that their situation improves. While there is a thorough review of children's progress, in a

minority of cases, this is not always translated into clear future actions, particularly when current actions are not being progressed.

Case conferences are held in a timely manner. Children's circumstances are well considered, with a clear analysis of current needs and any apparent risks. Case conference chairs carry out a mid-point review between conferences, which is providing better oversight of child protection planning.

Effective and regular use of advocates helps children to express their views about the help that they receive. When it is in their best interests, children are well supported to attend child protection conferences or to have their views shared by advocates. The local authority has clear plans in place to further develop this to ensure that children's voices are better heard in core groups and child in need planning meetings.

Children and families affected by issues of domestic abuse benefit from a range of positive interventions. In a minority of cases, the impact of this work insufficiently informs planning for children. Direct work is undertaken with children to better understand the impact of living in such environments, though this is not always recorded on their case records. There are clear efforts to produce safety plans to help to protect children and families from further domestic abuse. Some plans lack clarity in terms of identifying key actions, how such plans will keep children safe and how they will be shared across the partnership and reviewed.

Children at risk are appropriately made subject to the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline when these risks have not been reduced through prior case planning. When risk continues to escalate in the pre-proceedings stage, swift action is taken to keep children safe. Systems to track and analyse children's progress are not always effective. There is a delay for some children in stepping down from pre-proceedings where risks have been reduced. This means that children are the subject of a legal framework for longer than necessary. These shortfalls are recognised and new systems are being developed to resolve these issues.

Letters sent to parents to advise them of action being taken during the pre-proceedings stage highlight the risks and the reasons why practitioners are worried. Some letters seen by inspectors did not spell out clearly to parents what needs to happen, to enable them to consistently meet the needs of their children. Improvements to the letters are being made, in line with staff's knowledge of the recent best practice review. Increasingly effective use is made of family group conferences to engage members of the extended family and wider networks in children's plans. This supports families and helps them to sustain progress when statutory social work support is no longer required.

The recent introduction of panels in relation to children who are the subject of long-term child protection or child in need planning is not yet sufficiently embedded.

While clearly providing a forum for more effective oversight of these cases, the status of any recommendations or decisions and how they will be implemented is not clearly defined.

Risks to adolescents who are the subject of planning due to extra-familial harm are mostly well identified and responded to. Tenacious creative efforts are made by the Evolve team to engage children at risk. While a specific exploitation risk assessment is used, this assessment in some cases does not sufficiently inform up-to-date assessments of the current level of risk. A minority of subsequent risk minimisation or safety plans lack clarity as to the actions proposed and how these will help to keep children safe. The recent introduction of a specific operational multi-agency risk, vulnerability and exploitation panel is a positive development. However, the status of the panel lacks clarity and actions are not sufficiently clear, decisive or integrated within existing plans for children. The local authority has a clear improvement plan which includes bringing adolescent provision under one management span of control to improve the effectiveness of its exploitation response.

For children with disabilities, the service provides a good focus on both need and risk. Service packages are clear, reviewed and agreed by parents. A small number of children's circumstances, and their packages of support, are still waiting for an updated assessment and review, but there is management oversight of this. Children benefit from a multi-agency response, with effective information-sharing between partners.

Visits to children who are the subject of child protection and children in need plans are happening at an appropriate frequency. Good efforts are made to see children and to see them alone in creative, supportive spaces to engage them in meetings about their circumstances. Direct quotes from children recorded in their case records help to understand how children feel and what they need. Records of visits are carefully detailed and give powerful insights into children's lives and experiences. At times, analysis is missing which would enable increased focus on progress against the plan. Consequently, actions or next steps are sometimes not clear. Visits to children who have brothers and sisters are recorded on one form. In a minority, there could be better differentiation between individual children and their unique personalities and needs.

There is some variability in the regularity and quality of supervision. Records of supervision contain thorough updating of information about children's current circumstances. However, they show varying degrees of reflection and analysis. Actions are subsequently identified but, in a minority, these lack timescales to inject pace and are not sufficiently reviewed at subsequent sessions to identify progress.

Senior managers have a clear understanding of the quality of frontline practice. An effective quality assurance framework is in place and is providing accurate

information in relation to practice standards and compliance. The recently developed practice learning tool is very thorough, analytical and focused on impact. It contains detailed conversations with partners and parents to help triangulate the effect of work undertaken. Social workers spoken to by inspectors were enthusiastic about the tool and how it had helped them improve their practice.

Staff are very positive about working in Wandsworth and feel well supported by managers to deliver the ethos of relationship-based social work. Manageable caseloads create space for meaningful direct work with children to help their views to inform plans and decisions.

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

Yours sincerely

Andy Whippey
Her Majesty's Inspector