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13 November 2020

David Quirke-Thornton  
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Dear Mr Quirke-Thornton

### **Focused visit to Southwark local authority children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Southwark local authority children's services between 29 September and 1 October 2020. The inspectors were Brenda McInerney, Amanda Maxwell, Brenda McLaughlin, Sean Tarpey and Jon Bowman, all of whom are Her Majesty's Inspectors.

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.

The methodology for this visit was in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. The methodology was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context, and this visit was carried out virtually using video calls for discussions with social workers, managers and leaders. 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 and meeting the needs of the local authority's workforce.

## Overview

COVID-19 had a sudden and serious impact in Southwark in the early months of 2020. The pandemic presented a significant risk to public health in a diverse and densely populated borough, in which a high number of families live on low incomes. A rapid, whole-council response to support children's well-being and to avoid families falling into poverty has resulted in a very impressive range of help, support and intervention. Senior managers and staff have ensured that children and young people continue to be safeguarded. The best possible decisions are being made about children's care and education, despite the disruption and impact of the pandemic. Despite the immense financial pressures arising from the ongoing impact of COVID-19 in terms of reduced income and increased costs, political and corporate commitment to continue to protect and invest in frontline services for children remains strong.

Strong and well-established strategic and frontline partnership working has been further galvanised during the pandemic. Close working between the adults', children's and public health directorates ensured the early provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) and ongoing access to testing for frontline children's services staff. An alliance of schools, public health, family centres, social care, police, health visitors and community organisations worked closely together to provide a safety net for vulnerable children in need of services and targeted support to attend school. Inspectors found three key areas for improvement in social work practice, all of which are known to senior managers, and plans are in place for their development.

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

- the quality of social work practice with disabled children, specifically child-focused practice and relationship building with children
- the timeliness and effectiveness of pre-proceedings work
- the timeliness and quality of planning for older children at high risk in the community, including those receiving part-time or alternative education provision.

## Findings

- Staff in the early help service have been diligently reaching out to vulnerable families, to help to prevent them from falling into poverty or homelessness as a result of sudden unemployment or debt. The provision of technology helped families with vulnerable young children to access online services during lockdown, such as speech and language therapy. Support from health professionals has been strong. For example, health visitors have continued to offer targeted interventions to vulnerable babies and infants during and post lockdown, helping to prevent these young children from becoming invisible to services.

- Decisions in response to initial concerns about children, including children at increased risk from domestic abuse during the pandemic, are timely and proportionate. Decision-making for families being stepped-up from early help services due to escalating concerns is timely, and thresholds are being applied appropriately. Decision-making in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) has remained strong, despite staff and partner agencies working remotely. The proactive reaching out to families in need throughout the pandemic has meant that there has not, to date, been any marked rise in previously unknown concerns about 'hidden harm' occurring to children during and after lockdown.
- At the start of the pandemic, all children with an allocated children's services worker were risk assessed to determine the frequency and method of continued visiting. This clearly analysed the risks from COVID-19 for families and staff and resulted in continued but safely managed ways of seeing children, including very short-notice child protection visits. However, risk assessments for disabled children, whose social workers are part of adult services, are not being completed routinely. Senior managers made use of a very small number of regulatory flexibilities regarding virtual visits and meetings, and care packages for disabled children; these decisions were child centred and supported the maintenance or enhancement of service delivery.
- Children at risk of significant harm are being seen alone during child protection enquiries, despite the challenges of social distancing. Although not all strategy meetings are timely, child protection enquiries are thorough and result in immediate and proportionate safety planning to protect children.
- Decision-making following assessments of children in need is proportionate and supported by a detailed analysis of children's unmet needs and the strengths within families. A very small number of children wait several weeks for interventions to start within either early help or social care following assessment, due to current pressures on capacity in these services.
- Child in need and child protection planning is mostly comprehensive and child focused, although some outcomes in plans are too vague, and some plans have not been updated to reflect changing needs or escalating risk. In stronger work, families are supported to make and sustain change through a range of imaginative face-to-face and online interventions. Workers focus on helping families to understand the impact of abuse and neglect on children, and they undertake purposeful work that is making a difference. Decision-making and reviews of plans include a wide range of key partners.
- When families make progress but still need some support following child in need planning, they are appropriately transferring to early help services. Some families have experienced delay in being visited by their new early help worker due to the

demands on the service during COVID-19. Managers are now closely tracking engagement with families to understand and address any delays.

- The arrangements to track and progress cases for children subject to pre-proceedings are underdeveloped, leading to delay for some children. Leaders have sought to strengthen decision-making, although the pace of improvement has been slow. Decisions to step down children from pre-proceedings are proportionate but, in some cases, significantly delayed. This is due to a combination of previous lack of progress and the challenges of conducting parenting assessments remotely during the pandemic. Managers have taken recent action to create dedicated social work capacity to improve the timeliness of parenting assessments.
- Interventions to protect young people from criminal exploitation or serious youth violence are not always timely or well-coordinated across key agencies. The focus on risks from exploitation or knife crime for young people not in full-time education is not sufficiently strong. In recognition of these weaknesses, serious youth violence is now a key strategic priority for the partnership, and there are well-developed plans in place to establish a new multi-agency child exploitation hub. Given the prevalence of serious youth violence and criminal exploitation in Southwark, the pace of these planned improvements needs to accelerate.
- Social work practice to help and protect disabled children is not sufficiently strong, particularly in light of the impact of COVID-19 on families. Not all children are visited regularly, and children's circumstances were not risk assessed at the start of the pandemic. There is limited direct work to understand children's views, especially those of non-verbal children. As a result, the lived experience of many disabled children is not fully understood; case-work is too often focused on adults and is not sufficiently quality assured. More positively, wider additional funding and flexibilities are supporting parents in arranging extra or different care for their children during the pandemic. At the time of this visit, about 14 children with complex health needs were unable to return to school. This is largely due to the required COVID-19 infection control measures, which are challenging to provide within a school environment.
- There are many examples of schools in Southwark working tirelessly to go the extra mile for their vulnerable pupils. Many teachers maintained frequent contact throughout the summer term, undertaking 'door step' visits to homes or making frequent phone calls to parents. Schools, supported by the local authority, provided learning materials, laptops, food parcels and food vouchers that could be used in local shops and markets.
- Children who are not on a school roll have been provided with online learning, and well-coordinated responses to children in families with no recourse to public funds have helped to secure places in local schools. Effective targeted support for

the transition of year 11 pupils not in full-time education has resulted in a high proportion moving into post-16 education.

- Overall, most pupils have now returned to Southwark schools, and the numbers of children missing education have not, so far, increased from previous years. A significant increase in notifications of children being educated at home is being carefully managed. Schools are keeping children on roll while parents are helped by local authority staff to explore the best options for their children's education.
- The keeping families together team has continued to provide skilled and intensive support to prevent children from entering care and to support children to return home from care when safe and appropriate to do so.
- Children in care have continued to make some progress, despite the unprecedented impact of COVID-19. They live with carers who are committed to their well-being and they benefit from regular and sensitive interventions by their social workers. Well-considered decisions are being made about children's care placements in difficult and complex circumstances. However, support to prevent care placements from breaking down is not always happening early enough. Placement sufficiency and stability for older children present a considerable challenge in Southwark. Some key work in this area has been delayed by COVID-19. A very new commissioning framework is intended to improve the range and quality of placements available.
- Most children and young people in care or leaving care continue to have their health needs identified and met as far as is possible during the pandemic. A wide range of emotional well-being and mental health support services are available and offer consultation for social workers and carers as well as direct interventions and talking therapies for children and young people.
- Children in care are being helped to stay in touch with family members during the COVID-19 restrictions. Face-to-face contact has been facilitated by agency staff when necessary. Many children have had more frequent contact with their social workers during the pandemic, with a mix of face-to-face and online visits.
- During the pandemic, the virtual school has provided effective oversight of the progress of children in care, including school attendance and the take-up of remote learning during the summer term. Most children reviewed during this visit were making reasonable progress in their education over this period, supported by the provision of laptops and additional tuition through the virtual school.
- Foster carers spoke very positively about the support and help that they are receiving for children's care and education during the pandemic. They said that 'Social workers do what they say they are going to do.' Another carer told inspectors that their child felt 'extra valued and cared for' during lockdown, as a result of all the extra help with their remote learning. Additional support to foster

carers during the pandemic includes additional payments and out-of-hours support from clinical psychologists.

- Services for care leavers have improved significantly since they were last inspected in 2017. Planning and support for most care leavers are now of a high standard. Young people were full of praise for the help that they are receiving during the pandemic. Care leavers with mental health needs have easy access to a wide range of support. Sensitive work is undertaken with young people who are seeking asylum. However, some care leavers do not have access to housing tenancies when they are ready to live independently.
- The strong, corporate-wide focus on creating opportunities for care leavers means that many of them are in work, education or apprenticeships. Many of these opportunities have been created within Southwark Council, and senior leaders and elected members also work constructively with local businesses to extend the range of employment and apprenticeships.
- Audit and quality assurance work is not fully effective in improving systems and the quality of practice. Although case audits are regular and accurately identify strengths and weaknesses in social work practice, managers do not ensure that learning and actions are embedded across the wider safeguarding and care system. However, senior managers have clear plans in place to improve the quality assurance arrangements.
- During the period of the pandemic, senior leaders have continued to listen and respond to staff and local communities about any racial injustice and inequalities that they may be facing in their everyday lives. The impact of COVID-19 on health outcomes for Black, Asian and minority ethnic staff and families has been particularly profound in such a diverse borough. Children in care and young people leaving care told inspectors that they appreciate the opportunities to discuss their views and experiences with senior politicians and leaders.
- Social workers in Southwark are skilled and highly committed to improving the outcomes for children. Manageable caseloads allow them sufficient time to undertake direct work and to build trusting relationships with children, parents and carers. Socially distanced home visits are particularly challenging to undertake in a borough where few vulnerable children live in a home with a garden. Frontline workers have shown ingenuity by going on socially distanced walks with families or meeting in public spaces if home visits are not possible. Creative ways are being used to 'virtually' engage children, such as using smart phones to encourage children to provide a 'tour' around their house. Senior leaders have recently decided that all visits to children will now be conducted face to face when safe to do so.
- Social workers, practitioners and managers are being very well supported by service managers and senior leaders throughout the pandemic. Practical support

included the provision of laptops, PPE, free private transport and bespoke public health guidance. Staff spoke of being emotionally 'held' while working remotely, through regular keeping-in-touch meetings with managers to discuss well-being and work/life balance. This has supported frontline practitioners to sustain their energy and determination to protect and care for vulnerable children, despite the early and ongoing risks from COVID-19.

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

Yours sincerely

Brenda McInerney  
Her Majesty's Inspector