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Dear Mr Forbes

Focused visit to Hounslow children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Hounslow children's services on 29 and 30 July 2025. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Jenny-ellen Scotland, Monique Lindsay and Michele Henry.

Inspectors looked at how the local authority supports children in need, those on child protection plans, and children in pre-proceedings.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including a visit to a family hub, reviewing children's records and discussions with social workers about their work with children. Inspectors also reviewed the local authority's quality assurance and performance management information.

Headline findings

Since the last inspection in October 2023, when the experiences and progress of children who need help and protection were judged to be good, leaders have largely sustained effective practice, with some areas showing improvement. However, in a small number of areas, the quality of practice has not been fully sustained.

Leaders have improved the experiences of children receiving early help and child-in-need support by establishing a Family Help Team and developing three family hubs. Children now benefit from more seamless transitions between universal services, targeted early help, and specialist social work. This has helped families to sustain progress when risk and need are reducing.

Children generally receive the right level of service. Threshold decisions for children in need and those who are at risk of significant harm and are, or may need to become, the subject of a child protection plan are mostly well applied. Many children with child protection plans are supported by the intake team, where high caseloads limit practitioners' capacity to provide child-led, family-focused and effective support.

While children supported by practitioners with lower caseloads receive more focused support, further work is needed across the service to ensure consistent practice that promotes children's progress and improves their lived experiences.

Leaders have a clear and accurate understanding of their services, supported by a well-developed quality assurance and performance framework that supports the authority's model of practice and provides valuable insight into children's experiences. Since the last inspection, leaders have made progress in stabilising the workforce.

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

- Caseloads for workers and managers in the intake team, which currently do not allow practitioners the time and space required to work more effectively with children and their families. (enabler 2, national framework)
- The impact of quality assurance, management oversight, and supervision for less experienced practitioners, to help them maintain a clear focus on children's experiences and outcomes. (enabler 3, national framework)
- The response to children who are experiencing, or have experienced, domestic abuse. (outcome 3, national framework)

Main findings

Family hubs provide welcoming and supportive community-based spaces for children and their families, offering a wide range of services. A notable strength is the under-fives community and mental health service, delivered through a joint funding arrangement with two neighbouring local authorities. Staff within the family hubs play a key role in supporting families as they move between universal, targeted and statutory services, helping to ensure continuity and stability of support.

Strong corporate and political support have secured investment in the Family First Partnership Programme. The appointment of an assistant director to lead this work highlights Hounslow's clear and ambitious commitment to transforming services, with a focus on ensuring that children and families receive timely, well-coordinated and effective support when they need it most.

The newly formed Family Help Team provides effective support to children and their families who need targeted early help or statutory child-in-need support or are stepping down from child protection arrangements. Families receive timely intervention from family support workers for early help and from social workers for child-in-need support. Both groups of workers engage meaningfully with children to assess their needs in depth. Practitioners also work collaboratively with parents to build their understanding of these needs. Interventions are thoughtfully planned and often innovative, helping practitioners to gain a deeper insight into the child's lived

experiences, wishes and feelings. This approach is helping to prevent the escalation of risk and need for children.

Decisions for children to be supported under child protection plans are proportionate and underpinned by detailed assessments of need and risk. For most children, workers' assessments demonstrate appropriate consideration of family history and entrenched, often multi-generational, patterns of concern. However, for some children, this analysis is limited by workers not routinely updating chronologies on their records. Decisions to step down from child protection plans are similarly proportionate. When children step down from child protection planning, they benefit from continued support as children in need, delivered by the Family Help Team. This helps families to sustain the progress they are making.

Children with disabilities receive a responsive service from a social worker who understands their specific needs.

The local authority's policy is that, when concerns are such that a child protection plan is needed, responsibility for supporting the child should transfer from the intake team to dedicated safeguarding teams. Many children experience significant delays in transfer at this point, impacting on the quality of help and support they receive. Currently, over a quarter of all children subject to child protection plans remain in the intake team, where high caseloads across the team limit practitioners' capacity to provide timely and effective planning and intervention. As a result, risks for some children are not reducing at the pace required, leaving them in situations of risk for too long.

Handover meetings between the intake and safeguarding teams do not consistently occur when children transfer, so that families often have to repeat their story. This can be frustrating, and it can hinder the development of trusting relationships between families and practitioners.

Decisions to initiate the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline are appropriately considered, ensuring children receive timely support and protection from harm. Letters before proceedings are clear, articulating the local authority's concerns, the impact on the child, and a commitment to working collaboratively with families to avoid care proceedings whenever safe and possible. The tone effectively balances support with the seriousness of the issues. Senior leaders make effective use of trackers and Case Monitoring Board meetings to monitor the pre-proceedings process, ensuring it remains purposeful, effective and timely in meeting children's needs. Supervision orders are made appropriately and, when they are in place, children receive good support from practitioners.

Most social workers spend time alone with children, although the purposefulness and quality of direct work are variable. In the Family Help Team, practitioners use a range of tools to engage children and understand their lived experiences. In the

intake team, high caseloads limit the capacity for meaningful direct work at the intensity needed to reduce risk in a timely way. Practice in the safeguarding teams varies. Some workers use direct work effectively, although for some children direct work lacks focus and it does not explore concerns or help them make sense of their experiences.

Most children supported under child protection plans in Hounslow have experienced domestic abuse and/or neglect. While practitioners recognise presenting risks and take action to immediately safeguard children, social workers do not consistently use recognised evidence-based tools to shape their planning and interventions in supporting families to make and sustain change.

Practitioners do not always fully understand the immediate or long-term impact of domestic abuse on children or adult victims. Practice is sometimes underpinned by a sense of hope that situations will improve over time, rather than a clear and structured analysis of risk and harm. This limits the effectiveness of child protection planning and can delay the progress needed to keep children safe.

Social workers in Hounslow generally receive regular supervision, although its quality and impact vary. Social workers report that supervision supports reflective practice and provides appropriate challenge. However, for some practitioners, supervision sessions are too brief, lack critical reflection and agreed actions are not consistently time bound. For many, supervision remains predominantly process-driven, with insufficient focus on the quality and impact of social work practice on children and families.

Social workers report frequent, informal supportive discussions with managers. However, recording does not capture the depth of reflection and managerial oversight taking place. This also limits what children accessing their records in the future will see about how decisions affecting their lives were carefully considered.

Since the last inspection, leaders have invested in the workforce, reducing reliance on agency staff and building a stable team of permanent social workers committed to Hounslow. Their aim is to 'future-proof' the service by developing a resilient workforce that consistently delivers high-quality support to children and families. Recognising that many of the local authority's social workers are early in their careers, leaders have implemented a comprehensive plan to enhance support for practitioners. While this work remains at an early stage and its full impact is yet to be seen, the investment made reflects a clear commitment to building and retaining a capable workforce over time.

Social workers report that managers are visible and accessible. Staff said that they enjoy working in Hounslow and told inspectors that they value the kind and supportive culture that is both within and outside of their teams.

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

Yours sincerely

Jenny-ellen Scotland
His Majesty's Inspector