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Rory Patterson  
Director of Children's Services  
Civic Offices  
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Dear Mr Patterson

### **Focused visit to Thurrock Council children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Thurrock Council children's services on 11 and 12 September 2018, carried out by Margaret Burke and Mandy Nightingale, Her Majesty's Inspectors.

The inspectors focused on the local authority's arrangements for children in need and those subject to a child protection plan. They looked at a range of evidence, including children's case records and case discussions with social workers and team managers. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information.

### **Overview**

The Ofsted single inspection in 2016 found that services to children in Thurrock required improvement to be good. Since this inspection, there have been significant changes within children's services at all levels. More recently, the council has re-established a permanent children's services senior leadership team and has restructured the services. Leaders have increased social work capacity and introduced a strength-based model of practice, supported by staff training.

During this visit, inspectors identified some strengths and areas where practice is not strong enough. Senior leaders are aware of these strengths and weaknesses, and their development plan indicates that they have a clear understanding of what needs

to be done to improve services. They recognise continuing variability in the quality of practice and that recent improvements are not yet fully embedded.

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

- The quality and purposefulness of plans and written agreements.
- Children's access to advocacy services and opportunities and mechanisms for children to feed back their views and wishes in order to inform practice and service development.
- Workload pressures have been significant in some teams, although they are now reducing.

### **Findings**

- An increase in referrals in recent months resulted in significant pressures, with caseloads increasing to high levels in some teams. Leaders have responded by increasing social work capacity in the assessment and family support teams. This has made a noticeable difference, allowing workers to have more manageable caseloads and time to visit and support children and their families. Social workers prioritise regular visits to children, and no children's cases are left unallocated. Senior managers continue to monitor service demand in relation to the workforce.
- Social workers complete their assessments within the timescales expected by the local authority, and in some cases much more quickly to reflect the urgency for the child. Assessments are comprehensive, incorporating historic information, contributions and views from other professionals, consideration of children's identity and diversity needs. Some also include relevant research. Sufficient visits are made to obtain views from families and children, and social workers are increasingly including observations and quotes from children in their reports. Social workers' analysis is limited, often comprising descriptive lists of strengths and weaknesses, with insufficient evaluation of the information presented. Not all assessments are reviewed regularly in line with departmental expectations or when changes occur. This was most evident in the family support and disabled children's social work teams. Consequently, some children are receiving services and support which are not based on up-to-date assessments of their current needs.
- More recent planning demonstrates greater responsiveness to the changing circumstances of children and families. Inspectors saw proactive pre-birth planning and decisive action for children who had been subject to child protection plans for over 15 months. However, the quality of the plans themselves is too variable. Many are very general, often lacking in specific purpose. They do not include timescales and do not make it clear enough for children, their families or other professionals to understand how issues identified in the assessment will be addressed or what is needed to achieve and sustain change.

- A delay in the distribution of child protection conference minutes means that the social worker, professionals and parents do not have reference to information shared at conference to progress plans, other than their own notes.
- The authority has recognised that escalation by child protection chairs has not been used effectively to raise concerns and drive improvements in practice. New processes have been devised, and there are plans to implement them.
- Children are seen regularly by their social workers and, when appropriate, efforts are made to see them alone. Children are supported to build trusting relationships with social workers. Social workers demonstrated empathy and awareness of children's lived experiences and were able to share this verbally with inspectors. However, this information and actions to address children's views are not always clearly articulated in children's plans or their case records. Persistent efforts are made by social workers to capture the views of parents, including absent fathers and members of the wider family. Family members are suitably involved in planning and decision-making for children. This has resulted in some children being successfully supported to remain within their extended family networks.
- Advocacy is not routinely available to support children to participate in their child in need or child protection plans or meetings. The use of feedback from children and their families in service development is underdeveloped.
- Effective information-sharing arrangements between agencies ensure that risks are communicated and partner agencies are included in assessment, planning and support arrangements for children. Partner agencies consistently attend and contribute to child protection and child in need meetings, ensuring joined-up working arrangements and coordinated service planning for children.
- Families can access support from a range of community services in order to help to meet their children's needs. Specialist workers offer advice and expertise to social workers and families regarding recourse to public funds and domestic abuse, enabling families to access the most suitable services.
- Inspectors have seen practice which recognises the high risk of domestic abuse and the provision of appropriate responses. A good range of services are available to families, helping to raise awareness, protect children and support change. The multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC) arrangements are effective in supporting a coordinated approach to managing high risk and supporting families.
- Social workers are alert to concerns about child sexual exploitation; they use specific assessment tools appropriately to assess and manage risks. Oversight and review of these arrangements by frontline and senior managers is effective, managing and protecting children at an individual level and informing strategic planning. In a small number of cases, support arrangements made for vulnerable

children affected by child exploitation and gang-related issues are perceived as punitive and do not effectively engage families. Parents feel that they are held responsible for not protecting their children from circumstances outside their control. This has hindered collaborative working with families, with the potential to increase risks for children.

- Social workers report that managers are visible and supportive. They receive monthly supervision. Management oversight is evident on case records. However, its impact is too variable, with some managers often simply endorsing case records with a statement to say that they 'agree'. When the local authority's new case supervision record format is used, this more helpfully focuses the supervision discussion on the child and provides a more effective record of the discussion, reflection and guidance given. The local authority recognises that there is still more work to do to improve the quality of supervision and to continue to monitor supervision performance.
- The local authority has been successful in recruiting and stabilising a culturally diverse and permanent social worker workforce. This aids the development of meaningful relationships between families and workers who share an understanding and appreciation of cultural influences. Social workers informed inspectors that they like working for Thurrock local authority and that expectations about practice standards are clear. They have many opportunities for training, and personal development is actively encouraged.
- Performance management arrangements are in place and are used effectively by managers at all levels to inform and proactively manage practice. The revised quality assurance framework appropriately targets and addresses relevant areas of performance. Learning from auditing and performance monitoring is promoted. Early signs demonstrate that the impact of this work is improving practice.

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

Yours sincerely

Margaret Burke  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**