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Andrew Carter  
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Dear Mr Carter

### **Focused visit to Lambeth children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Lambeth children's services on 27 June to 28 June 2023. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Nicki Shaw and Naintara Khosla.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need and children subject to a protection plan. Inspectors considered the experiences and progress for children, the application of thresholds, step-up and step-down arrangements and children subject to the Public Law Outline (PLO).

Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

### **Overview**

At the last inspection of Lambeth children's services in October 2022, the experiences and progress of children who need help and protection were found to require improvement to be good. A new director of children's services (DCS) has been appointed since the last inspection. Senior leaders, including the chief

executive and lead member of the council, demonstrate a clear understanding of what needs to improve in the practice area inspected during this visit. Leaders have established more robust governance arrangements. Key agency partners attend the governance panel, and they ensure that they have a shared understanding of how partners can support the improvement of outcomes for children. Externally commissioned quality assurance activity is bringing an extra layer of scrutiny and an additional line of sight to leaders on the quality of support provided to children and their families.

During the focused visit, inspectors met with committed social workers who, more recently, are undertaking thorough assessments of children and family's needs which help professionals recognise and respond to risk and need in a timelier way. However, not all children are receiving help and support at the right level, or when it is needed. Senior leaders have commenced a whole-scale review of the service which already is leading to positive change for some children and their families.

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

- Effective transition arrangements for children's cases transferring between social work teams.
- Timely assessment and planning for children, including disabled children.
- Police response to children who go missing and police attendance at child protection meetings where information is shared to inform decisions about risks and plans to protect children.
- Effective multi-agency information-sharing at child protection conferences. In particular, timely written reports in line with statutory guidance.

### **Main findings**

Since the last inspection, there has been a strong focus by senior leaders on getting basic social work practice right for children in need of help and protection. The quality of assessments is improving, and more recent assessments show how the identification of risk and need is informed by the child's voice and direct observation. These assessments are thorough and demonstrate how social workers understand the diverse needs of children and their families who live in the borough. Many of the assessments seen during the visit identify complex issues and challenges which increase children's vulnerability, such as poor housing and poverty.

Not all disabled children have an up-to-date assessment and plan. Leaders acknowledge that more work needs to be done to improve the service to disabled children and their families. Leaders have already taken some action to address this. A new management team has been appointed and the DCS chairs a weekly panel to review children known to the service to ensure that progress is being made.

In children in need plans seen, more recent practice is improving outcomes for children. These plans set out how children are going to be helped to reduce risk and how support will be provided. More recent plans also include multi-agency partnership involvement which supports a holistic response to children's need and how interventions make a difference for children. However, some plans are adult-focused, and the outcomes are not always written in a way that helps parents understand what they need to do differently.

When children's cases transfer between social work teams at different intervention points, managers do not always ensure that children's assessments and plans, including safety plans, are up to date. This means that the receiving worker does not have a current understanding of the child's circumstances or experiences. This leads to some children experiencing drift and delay before having their needs assessed and responded to in a timely way.

Social workers know their children well and are committed to securing good outcomes for children. This is reflected in their most recent direct work, where children's views are captured well. Social workers spoke positively about families' achievements, no matter how small the success.

In most children's cases seen during this visit, children are seen by their social workers, but this is not always in line with the child's plan or level of need. For these children, it is difficult to see how plans are progressed when purposeful visits are not being undertaken. This impacts on children's ability to develop and sustain consistent and reliable relationships with their social worker. Leaders are aware of this and now monitor and review visits to children to promote timelier and better-quality visits.

Children and their families have been subject to a high number of child protection enquiries that did not lead to a child protection conference. Leaders were aware of this prior to the focused visit and responded by reviewing each child's case and the decision. This review identified that a high number of the children were already known to the service, and many were already subject to a child protection plan or did not require a child protection plan.

More recently, for children requiring a protection plan, the threshold in those children's cases seen by inspectors is appropriately applied. However, some children have stepped down from child protection plans to child in need too early because continuing risk has not been recognised and appropriately responded to. This results in some children experiencing repeat child protection plans. In a small number of instances, opportunities to safeguard children sooner have been missed, or the decisions to step a child's plan down to child in need are based on overoptimistic assessments of parental capacity to sustain change.

The multi-agency response to working with young people where contextual safeguarding is a vulnerability is strong. Inspectors saw evidence for one child where

the partnership worked holistically to meet the child's needs. Relationship-based practice across the partnership worked effectively to address a lack of education provision and risks associated with the child engaging in criminal activity.

Despite improvements in some partnership working, not all key partners attend strategy meetings or child protection conferences. This negatively affects the quality of the discussion, the information that is shared and the decisions that are made. Partner agencies do not always provide timely written reports for child protection conferences. This means parents are not provided with opportunities to read information which concerns them and their children before the conference. Police capacity to attend child protection meetings is inconsistent, as is the police response when children go missing from home. Senior leaders are fully aware of these issues and are actively addressing the ongoing challenges through the safeguarding partnership and through regular meetings with senior leaders from the Metropolitan Police.

Some children have remained in pre-proceedings for too long. These children have escalated to pre-proceedings without timely specialist assessments being completed when they were the subject of a child protection plan. This has led to drift for children and impacts on timely decision-making about their safety and future. Leaders have taken recent action and have responded effectively by ensuring that decisions made within the PLO are progressing now in a timelier way. A panel has been established chaired by a senior leader to provide oversight of children's plans and progress, but there is still work to do. Some PLO letters are written in jargonistic language, which makes it difficult for some parents to understand what is required of them, why and by when.

Leaders have strengthened the PLO process by securing an experienced court progression manager who has expertise in pre-proceedings and court processes. The tracker is an effective tool to provide information about the technical processes required in the PLO, for example timeliness of letters, review dates and assessments commissioned. Where parents have additional needs, there is good access to support, including a specialist family drug and alcohol service.

Staff use elements from various theoretical models of social work practice to assess risk and need, but this is down to individual social workers' application, rather than a strategic direction. This is leading to some inconsistency in practice. Leaders are confident that the recently launched social care academy will support staff to fully understand the preferred practice model and how to apply it consistently when supporting children and families.

Staff spoken to enjoy working for Lambeth and feel supported by managers, whom they describe as visible and approachable. Social workers report that they receive timely supervision, although this is not always recorded on the child's file. Social workers informed inspectors that they value the space to reflect in supervision with

their manager. Some supervision records seen during the focused visit are comprehensive; they review the child's current situation, explore risk and need and provide clear direction for follow-up actions.

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

Yours sincerely

Nicki Shaw  
**His Majesty's Inspector**