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Dear Andrew

Focused visit to Lambeth children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Lambeth children's services on 2 and 3 December 2024. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Brenda McLaughlin and Naintara Khosla.

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

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. Inspectors met with social workers to evaluate the experiences and progress of disabled children, children subject to child in need and protection planning and the quality of practice with children subject to the Public Law Outline (PLO).

Inspectors also reviewed the impact of the local authority's performance management and quality assurance activity in driving improvement.

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

Headline Findings.

Services for children in need and child protection in Lambeth have improved significantly since the last Ofsted inspection in 2022, when they were judged as requires improvement. Leaders know that there is more work to do to ensure that all children in need of help and protection receive a consistent, timely and effective service. The director of children's services, together with his senior team, has worked diligently to develop and support a culture of continuous learning and improvement.

A clearly articulated strategic child-centred vision to achieve safe and positive sustainable change for children is underpinned by continuous corporate and political financial investment despite challenging budgetary pressures. A successful ongoing programme of recruitment and retention has increased the numbers of permanent qualified social workers, providing the foundations for further improvements.

Strong governance arrangements and performance systems are firmly in place, augmented by a culture of professional accountability and respectful challenge. Leaders have an accurate and reflective self-assessment of their services. This is reinforced by a comprehensive understanding of the unique, complex demands involved in delivering equitable services to vulnerable children and their families adversely impacted by the cost of living crisis, poverty and insufficient housing.

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

- Frequency of visits to children to better align with their assessed needs.
- Frequency of purposeful direct work with children to build relationships and understand their lived experiences.
- Managers' recorded analysis on the impact of social work intervention in case supervision and in audit records aligned to the child's plan.

Main findings

Thresholds for children in need and child protection are mostly understood by social workers and managers in the family support and child protection service (FSCP). Swiftly organised child protection strategy meetings are chaired by managers and are well attended by relevant professionals. Records of decisions demonstrate a collaborative approach to understanding risks to children. Child protection medicals, including specialist sexual harm medicals, take place appropriately. Follow-up strategy meetings are convened to ensure all agency information is considered before work is finalised and plans for future work are agreed. The recent appointment of dedicated child in need reviewing officers based in the FSCP adds additional scrutiny. This is preventing drift in progressing children's plans and ensures that children receive the right level of statutory support and protection.

Lambeth's recently implemented practice model has unified a myriad of approaches and brought clarity for staff, managers and partner agencies. Increasingly, child and family assessments are comprehensive and well written and include the child's history. In stronger assessments, there is effective analysis of risk and harm, and staff identify the interventions necessary to meet children's needs. Consideration of family identity, cultural background and ethnicity is integral to most assessments. Children's and parents' and professional views inform child in need and protection plans. Interpreters are consistently used to ensure that family members understand concerns and are included in finding solutions. Midway reviews by child protection chairs monitor and quality assure the progress of plans and promptly escalate concerns to senior leaders.

The introduction of highly effective performance management and audit systems, supported by reliable real-time data, is driving continuous improvement and compliance with expected practice standards. Robust daily and weekly management

oversight meetings, chaired by senior managers, ensure that children are being visited more frequently and are seen alone. Action by leaders following the Ofsted focused visit in 2023 has ensured that children are promptly allocated to the right service.

Social workers in the FSCP teams have manageable caseloads, regular supervision and access to clinical support. Social workers visit children in line with local authority prescribed timescales, but this is not always in line with the child's plan or level of need. Most children's voices are captured well, and for some children creative direct work clearly informs subsequent planning. More work is needed to support social workers' ability to carry out purposeful direct work with children at their pace and bespoke to their assessed needs. For instance, work in larger families with children of different ages and differing complex needs requires additional interventions and increased visits beyond the current minimum standard.

Children with complex additional needs are benefiting from management action taken to reconfigure the disabled children service to a specialist 0 to 25 service, leading to vastly improved services. Risks and strengths for children are identified and carefully analysed in comprehensive assessments and decisions are informed by previous history. Child protection and care plans are articulated clearly. Disabled children are visited regularly by their social workers in school and at home, which helps workers understand their daily lived experiences. The co-location of an adults transition team ensures that planning for support into adulthood with health professionals and education begins early. The impact of caring for a child with complex needs and disabilities on parents and brothers and sisters is sensitively identified and appropriate support services are provided.

Significant improvements have been made in the arrangement to progress plans for children in the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline (PLO). These improvements are reducing delay in the completion of assessments and have ensured that families are successfully diverted from court, or that proceedings are issued promptly to ensure that children are not subject to neglect and other damaging home conditions for too long. Plainly written letters before proceedings ensure that parents understand the local authority's concerns. Previous concerns by the judiciary about non-compliance with court-directed orders have been addressed.

Social workers and managers are alert to risks to children outside the family home and understand the push and pull factors that influence children in being drawn into exploitative relationships. Risks to children are identified and are detailed in child protection and safety plans. The contextual harm tool is completed, but it is not always clear what added value this is providing to understand risks and the level of concerns. Leaders' decision to realign the extra-familial harm and child exploitation service is intended to strengthen the quality of direct work with criminally and sexually exploited children and those who are missing from home. It is too soon to evaluate the impact of these changes.

Most child in need and child protection plans reflect children's needs well. Progress is monitored in regular, well-attended multi-agency core group and review meetings. Conference review minutes provide a clear summary of concerns and decisions. Most children appropriately step down from child protection or children in need plans when risks reduce. Managers provide an effective child-centred analysis of the progress made for children when decisions are made for children to step down from child protection or close to social care involvement. This is an improvement from concerns identified in the previous focused visit. Partner agencies are not consistently included in these decisions.

Supervision and management oversight is regular for work with children in need and those subject to child protection plans; external scrutiny conducted in routine audits and by reviewing officers is a strength. The supervision recording template lends itself to repetition; depth and exploration of issues other than presenting concerns are not consistently considered. Leaders accept that supervision could be strengthened by a constant analysis of the progress being achieved aligned to the child's plan; for example, evaluations about whether requisite change for children is evident and being sustained, and analysis about whether parents understand what needs to change and whether they are complying with the plan.

Forensic consideration by managers of social work compliance with statutory processes, for example the frequency of visits to children and the timeliness of child in need and child protection core group meetings, is essential to their continuous improvements and shows substantial improvements. Leaders have appropriately focused on ensuring adherence to these basic requirements. They are now taking action to ensure that simultaneous evaluations and analysis about the impact of social work practice on children's lived experiences are made explicit in supervision records, audits, updated children's plans and in multi-agency reviews.

Leaders are fully aware of the challenges in recruiting qualified and experienced social workers. These challenges have led to multiple changes in staff, which impedes the development of trusting relationships with children. Assiduous work by council leaders is having a positive impact in addressing these issues. A comprehensive and effective workforce recruitment and retention strategy includes a successful initiative to recruit social workers internationally and to support newly qualified social workers to move into permanent posts. Gradual and thoughtful allocation of children's cases commensurate with the level of social workers' experiences is positive. Recently recruited international social workers are very positive about the support they have had, including living accommodation, induction and training.

Social workers who met with inspectors report that they enjoy working in Lambeth. They have access to support provided by responsive managers and relevant training opportunities for professional development. Agency staff are increasingly applying for permanent posts. A diverse workforce that reflects the local community is a real strength, leading to better engagement by children and their parents.

Stability of leadership and a strong culture of prioritising children and their needs is bringing greater consistency in the quality of practice management and oversight in the FSCP teams. The senior leadership team recognises and understands what needs to happen to ensure that services for children continue to improve and are implementing credible plans to address inconsistent practice.

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

Yours sincerely

Brenda McLaughlin
His Majesty's Inspector