

Annie Hudson  
Director of Children's Services  
London Borough of Lambeth  
International House  
Canterbury Crescent  
London  
SW9 7QE

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Dear Annie

### **Monitoring visit to London Borough of Lambeth children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Lambeth children's services on 21 and 22 November 2017. This was the eighth visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in February 2015. The inspectors were Brenda McLaughlin, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Carolyn Spray, Ofsted Inspector.

Senior leaders have taken effective action to address most of the serious safeguarding concerns identified at the August 2017 monitoring visit. As a result, the quality of social work practice in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) and in the child assessment teams (CATs), while still variable, has improved considerably. Children receiving services from the family support and child protection (FSCP) teams continue to benefit from more timely assessments.

### **Areas covered by the visit**

At this visit, inspectors revisited the progress made in the areas of help and protection, including:

- the quality of management oversight and challenge within the MASH to improve decision-making and the provision of help to children and young people

- the effectiveness of management oversight and quality assurance systems in the CATs to help and protect children
- the quality of practice and effectiveness of management oversight in the FSCP teams.

The visit considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records and supervision notes. We reviewed the local authority's updated self-assessment and performance information, and commented on the quality and impact of audit activity and the effectiveness of management oversight. In addition, we spoke to a range of staff, including managers, assistant directors and social workers.

## **Overview**

For the majority of children who need immediate protection, the identification of and response to risk by workers in the MASH and CATs have improved. Actions taken to protect children are more appropriate and effective. Thresholds are being applied more consistently and accurately as a result of the increased inclusion of partner agencies in strategy discussions and enhanced communication in daily MASH and integrated early help hub meetings. This means that more children are receiving the right levels of support and protection more quickly. Caseloads in the FSCP teams are manageable, but workloads in the CATs are still too high, although they are reducing in size. Additional capacity and support from other teams are ensuring that children are seen and that assessments are timely. Inspectors referred a small number of cases to senior managers to review, as there was evidence of drift in progressing plans for some children. Senior managers recognise that they need to take further action to improve and embed the consistent quality of work across these services.

## **Findings and evaluation of progress**

A comprehensive review of practice in the MASH and CATs following the August monitoring visit is leading to more effective performance management and quality assurance of practice. Managers are being held to account for performance in their teams. Appropriate action plans to address safeguarding concerns have been implemented. These include an increase in first- and second-line management capacity, enabling a greater focus on quality and resulting in safer decisions to help and protect children.

In addition, the introduction of core practice standards and guidance, together with learning from audits, means that deficits are addressed quickly. A whole-service conference in September, designed to increase social workers' knowledge and assessment skills, focused on professional curiosity and the importance of challenging over-optimistic practice. Reframing the early help offer to include improved tier 2 advice and support for partner agencies and a more targeted family support offer at tier 3 is intended to make a difference to children at an earlier stage. Consequently, children and their families are increasingly provided with better services, although the quality of practice is still inconsistent.

In the majority of cases that inspectors tracked and sampled, thresholds were correctly applied at all stages of the child's journey, and workers were identifying and analysing risk appropriately. However, the quality of assessments, particularly in the CATs, is too variable and only a small number of the assessments seen were good. Too many assessments are superficial and focus disproportionately on the parents. For example, in two cases in which a child or their parent had a learning disability, the impact of the disability was not evaluated. In most cases seen by inspectors, needs arising from diversity are insufficiently identified or assessed. Conversely, in the FSCP teams, where workers have an average caseload of 16 children, inspectors saw better assessments, including clear analysis drawing on past history and a rationale for decision-making that informs planning. Nevertheless, in too many cases assessments were completed without a chronology or a genogram. This resulted in family history and previous risk not being taken fully into account, for some children. In others, the assessment did not reflect a full understanding of the child's family and potential support systems.

Managers have made clear progress in embedding a stronger performance culture. Most children in need of help and protection are visited quickly, following allocation. Children are seen alone and direct work to understand their lived experiences is increasingly evident. However, the timeliness of statutory visits to children on child protections plans, while improving, is still low. In September 2017, 61% were completed on time, rising to 73% in October 2017. Managers are also working to improve the timeliness of core groups, as performance in this area is weak.

When cases are allocated, managers provide clear guidance to staff about what the assessment should address, the tasks that need to be undertaken and the timescale. Senior managers have recognised that this guidance is not always followed, so they have introduced a 10-day manager review to ensure satisfactory progress. This development is too recent to evaluate impact.

The regularity of supervision has improved vastly, although it is not yet always at the expected four-weekly frequency. When it does take place, it is thorough and involves the testing of hypotheses and agreed actions. Regular group supervision is clearly valued by social workers, as is the additional mentoring provided by advanced practitioners. The majority of social workers and managers who spoke to inspectors are positive about working in Lambeth. They feel valued by senior leaders, who support them well to do their job.

The workforce strategy is ambitious and realistic. The strategy has been instrumental in reducing both the caseloads and the earlier heavy reliance on agency staff. Once all new staff are in post, 25 out of 35 team managers will be permanent. Successful recruitment is reducing the overall rate of agency social workers to 28%, although rates are higher in some teams, such as the FSCP teams and the disabled children team. This is a vast improvement since the last inspection.

To conclude, this is the final monitoring visit prior to the planned re-inspection of children's services in 2018. Senior leaders continue to demonstrate a shared responsibility and detailed knowledge of their strengths and areas for development.

They are realistic about the challenges that they face to embed and sustain the considerable positive changes that they have achieved. Their uncompromising approach to 'do the right thing' has made a positive and discernible difference to the help, protection and care experienced by vulnerable children in Lambeth.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Brenda McLaughlin

**Her Majesty's Inspector**