

8 September 2017

Mr Ade Adetosoye
London Borough of Bromley
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Stockwell Close
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Dear Mr Adetosoye

Fourth monitoring visit to Bromley's local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Bromley children's services on 8 and 9 August 2017. The visit is the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate for overall effectiveness in June 2016. The inspectors were Marcie Taylor HMI and Louise Warren HMI.

The local authority is making substantive progress in improving services for children and young people at risk of sexual exploitation, and some progress for those who go missing. In the cases reviewed on this visit, no inadequate practice was found and aspects of good practice were identified.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the areas of children and young people at risk of sexual exploitation and those who go missing, including:

- the timeliness and response to the initial identification of risk, including the understanding and application of thresholds
- the quality and effectiveness of multi-agency practice, including direct work and commissioned services
- the quality and timeliness of management oversight, decision-making and the focus on the child in the quality of recording
- social work capacity and caseloads.

The visit considered a broad range of evidence, including electronic case records, other supporting documentation and discussions with a range of staff, including managers, social workers, partners and other practitioners. In addition, inspectors observed multi-agency meetings, including a strategy discussion.

Overview

In the cases considered, there is substantive progress in improving practice for children at risk of sexual exploitation and those who go missing. Strong commitment from strategic partners, senior leaders and elected members has resulted in priority action that has improved practice and outcomes.

Strengthened partnership collaboration is leading to improved multi-agency work to appropriately identify and respond to risk in most cases considered during this visit. Decisions are timely and proportionate, and taken by managers who demonstrate increased confidence in their professional judgement. The newly established Atlas Team supports this work. This team of specialist workers includes experienced police officers trained in child sexual exploitation, missing children, gangs and serious youth violence. These officers are co-located with social workers and practitioners from Barnardo's. Inspectors found increasingly effective management oversight, greater stability in the workforce and a steady reduction in caseloads. This has enabled social workers to have time to build trusting and purposeful relationships with children, and this is reducing risk.

Findings and evaluation of progress

The local authority is making good progress in implementing its action plan for children at risk of sexual exploitation or who go missing. This work is led well by the new chair of the Bromley Safeguarding Children Board (BSCB), who has been in post since April 2017. Early indications demonstrate a strengthened multi-agency contribution to the effectiveness of work in this area.

The impact of the 'triple lock' quality assurance and learning process is supporting more managers to be increasingly confident in their professional judgement. This is leading to a more consistent application of thresholds, compliance with statutory guidance in relation to timeliness and greater partner participation in strategy discussions. When cases step down from requiring a child protection plan, a specialist manager now chairs all initial child in need meetings to track and monitor the effectiveness of actions. This person also undertakes audits of all child in need plans which have been in place for two years or more. This is contributing to improved management oversight of the quality and consistency of practice.

The earlier identification and assessment of children at risk of sexual exploitation are informing detailed safety plans. These are shared with children and outline the direct work to be undertaken with them to help them to understand their vulnerability to sexual exploitation, particularly when they go missing. However, these safety plans are not yet consistently informing more holistic ongoing assessments of need and risk. They are currently used as 'snapshots' that identify risk factors at a particular time and do not reflect changing circumstances for children. This means that opportunities to intervene to prevent an escalation of risk may be missed.

Children who are particularly vulnerable and assessed as high risk are considered at multi-agency strategy discussions, which are chaired by the interim director for children's services. She is appropriately challenging to partners about their contribution to the safety plan. All children who go missing have a return home interview undertaken by dedicated workers in the Atlas team. The interviews seen on this visit were of a good quality, although they are not always completed in a timely manner.

The local authority now knows which children go missing and which children are at risk of sexual exploitation. Centrally coordinated data is more reliable and has improved management oversight, enabling appropriate support to be targeted to those most at risk. Work to understand the links to children who are involved with or affiliated to gangs has begun more recently. More work is needed to understand the local profile of children at risk and to evaluate data from return home interviews, in order to identify trends and locations of concern. This will inform priority actions and plans in a more effective way.

The chair of the BSCB is leading the work to progress the priority in the improvement plan that focuses on children at risk of sexual exploitation and those who go missing. Since April 2017, considerable activity has successfully raised awareness across all agencies of the risks to this group of children. The Board has established a subgroup to lead on the multi-agency response to vulnerable adolescents and developed a comprehensive strategy with supporting protocols. The launch of an innovative suite of 'apps' includes detailed information on thresholds, escalation policies, a range of social media policies, video briefings, key policies and practice guidance relating to child sexual exploitation and children who go missing. This is leading to more effective awareness and multi-agency engagement and practice, particularly of schools and the police. The newly established multi-agency sexual exploitation group has established links with the multi-agency panel, which has a clear remit to identify key actions for individual agencies to reduce risk. Work to establish and strengthen strategic and operational relationships with housing and health is under way and should remain a priority.

The current range of commissioned services for children at risk of sexual exploitation is limited. This means that not all children can access the right support quickly enough. The local authority is using its improved understanding of the needs of this group of children to consider its future commissioning approach, to ensure that a range of accessible services is available to meet the needs of Bromley children. The local authority is committed to making individual arrangements to meet the needs of children assessed as most at risk. This includes funding for specialist placements and independent specialist social work assessments.

Social workers and team managers spoken to by inspectors during this visit reported that caseloads are reducing and that there is increased capacity, including additional workers, to teams. They reported that this is enabling them to build better

relationships with children. In most cases seen on this visit, there is evidence of purposeful direct work with children to help them to understand the risks when they go missing. Improved case recording demonstrates that their wishes and feelings are being captured and considered more consistently.

Social workers told inspectors that managers are visible and accessible and that they feel increasingly listened to and valued. The social work advisory group enables social workers to be involved in service improvements, and this is developing trust and confidence in the senior management team. The local authority has made significant improvements in creating a more stable workforce. The 'Bromley Promise' sets out an offer of manageable caseloads, clear practice standards, a protected induction period and dedicated time for reflective supervision. This is attracting social workers to Bromley, and a high number of agency workers are transferring to permanent positions. At the time of the inspection in June 2016, 42% of social workers had permanent contracts; the most recent data from the local authority shows that this figure has risen to 85%.

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

Yours sincerely

Marcie Taylor

Her Majesty's Inspector