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Ms Carmel Littleton
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Dear Ms Littleton

Focused visit to London Borough of Islington children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to the London Borough of Islington children's services on 17 and 18 April 2018. The inspectors were Andy Whippey, HMI, and Kate Malleson, HMI. The quality assurance manager was Sean Tarpey, Senior HMI.

Inspectors considered the local authority's arrangements for vulnerable adolescents in accordance with the Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services framework (ILACS). Specifically, they considered the identification and management of risk and vulnerability for adolescents in need of support and protection. Inspectors looked at the quality of planning to meet these young people's needs and whether practice is timely and effective in helping to protect such young people from harm.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence that included case discussions with social workers and their managers. They also observed a strategy meeting, the multi-agency sexual exploitation panel (MASE), and spoke with a number of professionals from partner agencies.

Overview

Within the cases considered during this visit, the service provision for vulnerable adolescents in Islington is strong and robust. There is a determined focus to improve outcomes for these young people across the council. Senior political leaders, elected

members and officers demonstrate a determination to improving services for vulnerable adolescents in Islington. This can be seen in the obvious investment in services, including the exploitation and missing team and the integrated gangs team.

Risks to vulnerable adolescents considered during this visit were identified well and comprehensively assessed. Risks are not seen in isolation and the interlinkages between risks are well understood. This leads to the development of effective intervention plans that are dynamic and that respond appropriately to changing levels of need or risk. Plans result in effective targeted interventions and support. They demonstrated to inspectors that they know their young people well and are confident and competent in their work. Social workers show tenacity in their efforts to engage young people. Social workers reported that they are well supported, and morale within the local authority is high.

Partnership working is strong within the council as well as with partner agencies and the voluntary sector. Sound governance arrangements promote good communication that enables successful coordination of work to support young people at risk of exploitation effectively. A comprehensive range of well-coordinated interventions delivered through council and commissioned services ensures that there is a depth of provision available to meet the needs of young people. Substantive awareness raising and specialist training across the partnership have been undertaken by the exploitation and missing team. This has appropriately focused on the issues and risks around child sexual exploitation, gangs, incidents of going missing, knife crime, trafficking and modern slavery. The impact of this activity has led to an increased confidence for those working with this vulnerable group in recognising and tackling such forms of exploitation.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Plans considered during this visit for children are not universally clear, although all plans did contain appropriate, focused goals based on strong assessment identifying what needs to change. In a small minority of cases, detail of the actions to support the achievement of these goals is variable, particularly in relation to giving clarity as to the timescales required for actions to be completed or for changes to occur.
- In a small number of return home interviews, there is insufficient analysis of all recorded information to inform case planning.

Findings

- Thresholds are appropriate and well embedded in practice. Child protection and legal applications are used effectively when the level of risk or unmet need requires such a response. Decisions are taken with the right level of confidence and authority. This ensures that children and young people receive the right level of service when they need it.

- Early help services are effective in undertaking preventative work with vulnerable young people at risk of exploitation. Inspectors found positive examples of early help interventions delivered by early help practitioners and commissioned providers positively influencing the lives of young people potentially at risk.
- The vast majority of assessments relating to adolescent vulnerability are completed in a timely way, with clear direction and focus provided by managerial oversight. Assessments reflect the lived experiences of young people and provide clarity as to their wishes and views, which are clearly sought.
- A range of appropriately configured panels effectively manage risk relating to young people. The panels identify and consider themes of concern and help to inform strategic planning, for example the promotion of targeted disruption activity. All panels are appropriately configured, with clear terms of reference. There is good attendance from partner agencies and the panels demonstrate strong integrated planning. Young people are effectively tracked to monitor their progress, with increasing risk and vulnerabilities being appropriately recognised.
- Good use is made of the child sexual exploitation assessment tool, with assessments being appropriately reviewed to ensure that any changes in young people's circumstances are recognised. Risks in relation to child sexual exploitation are well understood, leading to effective safety planning. Inspectors found positive examples of direct work being undertaken with young people to minimise risk, delivered with sensitivity and appropriate persistence.
- The response to children and young people at risk of radicalisation is appropriate, and informed by a clear referral pathway. Thorough screening of relevant information is undertaken, and where deemed necessary, assessments are undertaken in response, with specialist advice sought.
- Risks in relation to when young people go missing are well managed. The effective use of strategy meetings, coupled with stringent efforts to locate and stay in touch with young people, helps to keep young people safe. Risk assessments are completed, reviewed regularly and safety plans put in place. Return home interviews are consistently offered, with sustained efforts being made to try and engage young people in the process even when they refuse to undertake these. While most completed return home interviews were of a good quality, in a minority there needed to be a better link made between information gathered and future care planning.
- The integrated gangs team is highly effective in providing support and interventions to young people at risk of, or involvement in, exploitation through gang activities. Exceptionally knowledgeable and skilled practitioners from a range of relevant agencies demonstrate persistence and commitment to improving the lives of the high-risk and highly vulnerable young people. Comprehensive real-time mapping of associates and information informs a strong

assessment of the complexity and risk in young people's lives, leading to comprehensive and methodical safety planning.

- Direct work with young people is well embedded in practice. Inspectors saw creative examples of work with young people promoting positive outcomes for them. Specific training to social workers in trauma informed practice, alongside other therapeutic tools, has enabled them to be skilled at better understanding the lived experiences of vulnerable young people. This ensures that the interventions necessary to promote the well-being of young people is clearly understood by all practitioners. Inspectors found evidence that issues of diversity are routinely considered to understand and meet individual young people's needs.
- Social workers have manageable caseloads that enable them to have capacity to build trusting relationships with young people. Social workers benefit from consistently frequent supervision, which they report they value. Inspectors saw examples of reflective supervision positively impacting on the work of social workers with young people. While generally consistently good, in a very small minority of cases considered, supervision was insufficiently clear to provide clear case direction, particularly in terms of the timescales for actions to be completed.
- The work of the exploitation and missing team is effective as it supports assessment and planning for vulnerable young people. The team undertakes specialist risk assessments, information and intelligence sharing and offers support and expertise to develop safety and intervention plans. The work of the team is well valued by social workers. During this visit, inspectors found positive examples of how the work of this team had significantly enhanced the depth of assessment and planning.
- Extensive and comprehensive performance information ensures that managers know the quality of frontline practice. This information is effectively used and shared to underpin individual and strategic responses to protect vulnerable young people and reduce the risk of further harm. This results, for example, in effective identification of themes as well as geographical locations of concern where young people involved with, affiliated to and at the fringes of gang activity live and congregate. This leads to effective targeted interventions for those most at risk and early identification of those potentially at risk.

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

Yours sincerely

Andy Whippey
Her Majesty's Inspector