

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
Textphone 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Ade Adetosoye
Bromley Civic Centre
Stockwell Close
Bromley
BR1 3UH

Dear Ade

Monitoring visit of Bromley local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Bromley children's services on 12 and 13 June 2018. The visit is the seventh and final monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in June 2016. The inspectors were Marcie Taylor, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Alison Smale, Her Majesty's Inspector.

The local authority is making significant progress in identifying risks to vulnerable adolescents and improving services to safeguard them.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the area of vulnerable adolescents, particularly:

- the effectiveness of initial and ongoing multi-agency identification and response to risk, relating to those who go missing, or those who are at risk of child sexual exploitation or criminal exploitation and gang affiliation
- the commissioning, access, timeliness and effectiveness of interventions and services to support young people to protect them from harm
- the quality and timeliness of management oversight, decision-making and the focus on the young person in the quality of recording
- social work capacity and caseloads.

A range of evidence was considered during the visit, including electronic case records, discussions with social workers and their managers and other supporting documentation. In addition, inspectors observed multi-agency meetings, including the daily multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) meeting and the multi-agency missing, exploitation and gang affiliation panel (MEGA).

Overview

The local authority and partners are working well to improve practice and outcomes for vulnerable adolescents. Strong multi-agency commitment is evidenced by dedicated resources, and results in a good understanding and response. Effective collaboration is making a difference and increasing the resilience of these young people as well as improving their circumstances.

Strong commitment from strategic partners and senior leaders in the council has resulted in strengthened and effective collaboration. This is leading to more timely and appropriate action to reduce risk and provide effective help and support. This is improving the outcomes for most of this group of highly vulnerable young people with complex needs. Services are commissioned based on a good understanding of young people's needs, and where appropriate, informed by their views. There is effective management oversight of assessments of risk and safety plans. The steady reduction in caseloads is enabling creative and impactful direct work that is reducing risk.

Findings and evaluation of progress

The processes in place to identify vulnerable adolescents at risk of child sexual exploitation and those who go missing are well established. The Bromley safeguarding children board oversees this work effectively and has led the development of a wider consideration of risks to include serious youth violence, gang affiliation, and those at risk of criminal exploitation and radicalisation. Following a review of the multi-agency sexual exploitation panel (MASE), the local authority established the weekly MEGA panel, with full cooperation from partner agencies. This panel brings together all the information and risks known about vulnerable adolescents and is leading to a more coordinated, effective and wider multi-agency response. The panel includes youth offending workers, targeted youth support and the probation service. Critical links and distinctions between those at risk of criminal exploitation and those who are involved in crime are emerging. Inspectors observed the work of the MEGA panel, which considered 16 young people. Inspectors observed an effective multi-agency focus to reduce risk, including good cross-authority and cross-agency liaison. This has led to clear actions with timescales, the progress of which is followed up at subsequent panels.

Multi-agency practice for young people at risk of child sexual exploitation and those who go missing is effective. Risks are identified, and impact is evident in reducing risk, as seen in a reduction in the numbers of young people who go missing from home or care and school. Such work is also effective in improving relationships within families and ensuring that there is appropriate engagement in education. Thresholds are appropriately and consistently applied, and emerging risk is quickly recognised and responded to in most cases. Strategy meetings are used well to share information effectively and to make safeguarding decisions when necessary to reduce risk. Risks are identified in safety plans, which are increasingly undertaken with the input of young people. The local authority is streamlining and aligning risk

assessment documentation to improve the holistic assessment of risk to include risk associated with serious youth violence and gang affiliation.

Social workers and key workers in the youth offending service know the young people with whom they work well and focus on understanding their lived experience. They are tenacious in building rapport with young people even when they are hard to engage. This enables confident and sensitive challenge and support for young people. This also encourages and facilitates change, as young people develop a greater understanding of their risky behaviours and implement safer strategies. Inspectors saw evidence of clearly recorded direct work with young people that is imaginative and is used to inform safety planning. This includes young people actively involved in developing their own safety plans using posters and booklets. Reducing caseloads in line with standards set by the local authority is resulting in greater capacity for high quality direct work.

Management oversight was evident in all cases seen during this visit and all social workers described supervision as regular and helpful. The quality of supervision varies. In better examples, supervision is reflective and systematically reviews the progress of decisions previously agreed. However, in some cases, actions arising from supervision are insufficiently specific, achievable or targeted and lack clear timescales for actions to progress plans. This does not give social workers clear guidance for completing and prioritising their work.

The multi-agency 'Atlas' unit is instrumental in strengthening key relationships across the partnership. It is now co-located within the MASH and includes a representative from the youth offending service. The single point of contact (SPOC) at each agency enables access to key information in identifying risks so that suitable and timely decisions can be made at the front door. This includes early consideration of wider contextualised risk. Inspectors saw evidence at the daily MASH meeting of confident and sensitive understanding and response to potential risk, including that of radicalisation and female genital mutilation.

Return home interviews are undertaken increasingly and in a timely manner when young people go missing. They are undertaken by dedicated workers based in the 'Atlas' unit. The number of young people participating in these interviews is increasing and the workers demonstrate tenacity and imagination in engaging with young people to understand their issues. Social workers make clear recommendations that are included in updated plans that are used as contributions to core groups, child in need meetings and child looked after reviews. Themes are captured by the data analyst and are used effectively to address emerging concerns. For example, a 'mystery shopping' exercise, led by the police, uses police cadets as young people to attempt to check in to local hotels and bed and breakfast establishments. The lack of challenge by the businesses, discussed in subsequent debriefing sessions, led to eight out of 10 businesses attending training to raise their awareness and improve their response to those at risk of child sexual exploitation. The installation of close circuit cameras in parks where young people have said they congregate when missing is a further example.

The data analyst produces reports for the children's social care performance digest, gathered from the MEGA panel and return home interviews. This compiled information on individual young people, associates, demographics and trends, informs a 'problem profile' for the area. This ensures that senior managers and elected members have effective oversight of those most at risk and enables appropriate prioritisation of action and resources.

The local authority has carefully considered the commissioning of services to support vulnerable adolescents, with a clear understanding of local need. A range of services, such as family therapy, are available, with evidence that these are valued by families. In a small number of cases, delay in timely access to support is because of long waiting lists. Between January and March 2018, a worker commissioned from Barnardo's provided individual, intensive, systemic direct work to 17 young people at risk of child sexual exploitation as well as to three families. This support is highly valued by young people and families, who report positively about being 'listened to in a non-judgemental way'. Specialist foster carers or residential placements are commissioned for young people who need it. This includes effective multi-agency support for those placed out of area.

Yours sincerely

Marcie Taylor
Her Majesty's Inspector