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Dear Tony

Focused visit to Hillingdon local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to the London Borough of Hillingdon children's services on 15 and 16 January 2020. The inspectors were Marcie Taylor, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Louise Hocking, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors considered the local authority's arrangements for protecting vulnerable adolescents. Specifically, inspectors looked at the early identification of risk and the quality and effectiveness of the response throughout children's services. They also evaluated the quality of work to reduce identified risk and to establish whether interventions had improved children's and young people's circumstances.

Inspectors reviewed a broad range of evidence that included case discussions with social workers and managers, direct observation of practice, and meetings with coordinators of support services. They also considered the effectiveness of the local authority's oversight of this area of work and the effective use of quality assurance information.

Overview

Vulnerable adolescents in Hillingdon receive a highly effective service. An established whole-system approach ensures that, from the first point of contact, risks are quickly identified. This leads to decisive actions, plans and interventions to reduce risks and improve the circumstances of children and young people. Leaders give due priority to resources and offer high-quality support to workers who are skilled and committed. This enables them to adopt an innovative approach in their work, based

on developing trusting relationships, and increasingly protects and supports young people with very complex needs who may present as high risk.

Effective multi-agency communication, cooperation and collaboration ensure that vulnerable young people and their wider associations are identified early and preventive services are offered quickly. Accessible, flexible and creative programmes of bespoke targeted services help young people to understand risk and to recognise their vulnerability to exploitation. This improves their capacity to apply strategies in order to keep themselves safe. Established systems identify and provide good oversight of young people who go missing from home, care or school. However, return home interviews are not sufficiently tailored to capture relevant and appropriate information about all risks of exploitation. Consequently, this information does not sufficiently inform strategic and individual safety planning.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The capture, collation and recording of information for all children who go missing.

Findings

- Detailed and child-centred information from partner agencies, including the out-of-hours service, provides good initial information for assessing the vulnerability of young people at risk of exploitation. This enables timely and appropriate responses. Workers demonstrate good understanding of risk in their analysis and identify actions that are timely, proportionate and appropriate.
- Thoughtful and analytical assessments clearly evidence the appropriate consideration of wider contextual harm and the risks of exploitation. Such assessments ensure that subsequent safety plans are appropriately informed and consider relevant history and current research.
- Safety plans are creative and are appropriately used with young people and their carers to articulate what needs to happen to keep young people safe. Clear contingency planning is in place to respond to situations when safety plans are not adhered to or are proving to be ineffective.
- Young people over the age of 10 who are assessed as being at risk of exploitation are supported by workers in the adolescent team, although most of the children are aged between 14 and 16 years of age. Here, young people are able to select their own workers from prepared profiles that outline workers' experience and interests. This is enabling young people to forge effective and trusting relationships that are quickly established and maintained. Persistent and tenacious approaches by workers have a positive impact on engaging young people in purposeful interventions that reduce risk.

- Some budgets have been devolved to individual social workers. This enables them to provide increased support at times of crisis and empowers them to use their professional autonomy to ensure the best and most creative solutions are considered and applied. Protected caseloads and regular high-quality case and group supervision provide clear direction and support to workers. This increases their confidence and ability to effectively manage young people with high levels of risk and complex needs.
- The AXIS project is the comprehensive partnership approach to the early identification of young people at risk of exploitation. This includes daily reviews and analysis of real-time information for vulnerable young people. Workers within AXIS provide advice and rapid, targeted intervention to support young people who may not otherwise receive a service. This work is a successful balance of managing the highest risk while seeing the most troubled young people as individuals with their own hopes and aspirations. The workers offer effective preventive services and access to wider services should these be needed. Monthly bulletins provide statistical data and information in relation to national and regional trends, including emerging local concerns. This helps to improve the knowledge and skills of a range of professionals involved in supporting this highly vulnerable group of young people.
- A comprehensive programme of council and public health-funded targeted services are available within the borough. These are well coordinated, flexible and accessible, and include provision during evenings and at weekends. The service provides mentors, counsellors, and support workers for drug and alcohol use and misuse. There are also specialist programmes for addressing the risks of exploitation and associated risks of serious youth violence, gang affiliation and county lines. Young people can access and attend a farm-based residential programme with their key workers. This helps to establish meaningful and trusting relationships and provides an opportunity for young people to be better informed and understand the risks posed by others.
- The 'high risk management panel' provides effective senior manager and multi-agency oversight of the experiences and progress of vulnerable adolescents. Individual agencies share their knowledge of specific young people, their peers, families and social networks. Good use is made of data and soft intelligence, including rumour of potential risk. This is used to positive effect in disrupting and preventing criminal exploitation and includes information about young people who go missing from home, school or care.
- Return home interviews are routinely offered to young people through a commissioned service. However, they are not sufficiently tailored to capture relevant and appropriate information relating to risks of exploitation. Consequently, this information does not effectively inform strategic and individual safety planning. Workers with established relationships with young people are more successful in encouraging disclosure about their whereabouts and experiences. This more meaningfully informs risk assessments.

- The council provides a wide range of suitable placement options for vulnerable adolescents who are in care, as well as care leavers. These include placements with immediate and wider family, semi-independence and out of area therapeutic residential options, as well as extended placements for young people approaching 18 years of age.
- Young people are visited frequently, including those who live at some distance from Hillingdon. Records of visits focus centrally on the young person and reflect the effective and trusting relationships with workers. This enables young people to share experiences with workers, in some cases for the first time, about their vulnerabilities and risks. This means that the right help is sourced and targeted in the right way to support young people. Creative approaches to encouraging engagement with education, employment and training result in purposeful opportunities and diversion from risky behaviours.
- Senior managers know and understand the quality of practice and provision in this area. Established audit and practice observations highlight areas for development. This is then reflected in the programme of learning and development available to all staff. High-quality, regular, individual and group supervision supports workers to confidently 'think outside the box' and apply creative and innovative approaches to effectively supporting this group of young people. Manageable caseloads enable workers to proactively engage with young people and provide intensive, effective interventions to reduce risk. Staff morale is high, and staff report that they are enthusiastic, motivated and energised in their work. Inspectors found good evidence of this during this visit.

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

Yours sincerely

Marcie Taylor
Her Majesty's Inspector