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Dear Ms Wardell

Focused visit to Merton local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Merton local authority children's services between 6 and 8 October 2020. The visit was carried out by Kate Malleson, Nick Stacey, Sean Tarpey and Jon Bowman, all of whom are Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI), and Tom Anthony (HMI designate).

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic.

The methodology for this visit was in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. The methodology was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context and this visit was carried out virtually using video calls for discussions with social workers, managers, leaders and partners, carers and children. The lead inspector and the director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19 and meeting the needs of the local authority's workforce.

Overview

The most vulnerable children and families in Merton have benefited from a high level of protection and support throughout, and despite, the COVID-19 emergency. Nearly all children and young people in Merton's care have continued to make good progress and have been protected. Children's services staff, schools and partner agencies have worked together very effectively to enable the most vulnerable children and children in care to continue to attend school. Dedicated and skilled children's services staff have gone to great lengths to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on children and families in Merton. In turn, staff have been very well supported by senior leaders and managers.

Leaders swiftly undertook sophisticated assessment and planning to make the best use of available staff and physical resources as the pandemic arrived in Merton. Difficult decisions were carefully made against a background of uncertainty about the potential impact of the pandemic on workforce capacity. An already strong safeguarding partnership provided very regular robust oversight and challenge, both operationally and strategically. This facilitated swift problem-solving as concerns emerged. Evidence from case discussion, the review of records and discussions with partners, including schools, is overwhelmingly positive about Merton's strong, effective and child-centred response to the pandemic.

Senior managers have already identified the areas for improvement and have plans in place to develop practice in these areas.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Planning and intervention to minimise the risk of harm experienced by children from criminal exploitation.
- Earlier permanence planning and life-story work for children so that they achieve permanence without delay and understand their histories.

Findings

- Responses to initial concerns about children are timely and proportionate. Management decisions are clear; they are strengthened by appropriate professional curiosity and a thorough consideration of family history and the impact of previous interventions. Information is shared effectively by a wide range of partners. The multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) has adapted quickly to online working, and the anticipated increase in referrals over the past few weeks has been managed well.
- Strategy meetings are held promptly, usually on the day of the referral, to consider the risk of significant harm faced by children. The meetings are well attended by a wide range of relevant agencies, in addition to health and police partners. This enables rich information to be generated about the children and their circumstances. Most records contain clear actions and management decisions about whether child protection enquiries need to take place and whether investigations need to involve police partners.
- Children benefit from careful assessments of their needs, which result in the appropriate level of help and protection. Decisions about whether to proceed to initial child protection conferences accord with statutory guidance and Merton's child and young person well-being model. Children are seen promptly, and initial safeguarding assessments and safety planning are rigorous.
- Multi-agency work to safeguard children and to promote their welfare is highly effective. Meetings are well attended, and attendance has improved further during the pandemic. Online meetings have facilitated, and been enhanced by,

the attendance of general practitioners. Core groups carefully explore the progress of plans to improve children's circumstances and the capacity of parents to achieve meaningful change. Decisions to step cases up when concerns escalate or to step cases down when concerns diminish are largely appropriate and proportionate in order to safeguard and protect children at risk of harm.

- Senior managers acted quickly to identify the children who were most at risk when schools were closed. Every child on a child protection plan or an education, health and care plan (EHCP), or designated as a child in need, was reviewed by education and children's social care managers to determine what was needed to ensure their safety, to maintain school attendance and to provide them with an appropriate level of support. Any concerns about a child were followed up effectively by social workers, the education welfare service or the special educational needs team. Significant efforts by staff in schools provided oversight of these vulnerable children throughout the lockdown period. Through frequent welfare calls to children and their families and visits to their homes, school staff identified some new vulnerabilities, such as economic hardship. They mitigated these issues through, for example, providing food vouchers and food to families. The attendance for these vulnerable children increased over the period of the summer term. Some children with education, health and care plans thrived in smaller groups in school, while others responded well to remote learning.
- Managers have effective oversight of children who are missing education and those who are educated at home, despite a significant rise in the number of parents choosing to home educate. There are clear processes for identifying children missing education, and appropriate checks are undertaken with a range of agencies to establish if children have a school place or if they are not in receipt of a suitable education. The majority of vulnerable children are attending school regularly.
- Disabled children and their families benefit from good relationships with their social workers. Risks faced by these children are identified so that they receive the most appropriate level of support. Effective multi-agency plans ensure that children's needs are central. Severely disabled children and their parents and carers were helped by continued support and respite from a specialist in-house out-of-school provision during the lockdown. Packages were adapted and tailored, alongside careful risk assessments, which allowed the vast majority of children who attended respite to continue to do so either in the evening, daytime or weekends while their special schools were closed during the lockdown. Many of the children have highly complex medical conditions, and the confidence and trust of their parents in the manager and staff at the respite centre is clearly very high.
- Children at risk of, or who experience sexual exploitation, receive an effective service and as a result, risk reduces. The multi-agency risk, vulnerability and exploitation panel exercises regular and careful oversight, and this is supported

by casework supervision. Interventions are protective and sensitive and, when appropriate, are supported by enforcement activity such as child abduction warning notices. Parents and carers are engaged and included in safeguarding their children. Children learn how they can help to keep themselves safe through direct work with a range of specialist in-house or commissioned services. This holistic approach develops a more sustainable circle of protection around the child or young person.

- Safeguarding risks to older children outside of the family home are recognised at an early stage. Skilled and knowledgeable specialist workers are gradually increasing the confidence and competence of the wider social care workforce in this area. However, work to address risks from criminal exploitation is not consistently demonstrating impact. Senior managers have already identified that the response to criminal exploitation requires strengthening, and they plan to develop a contextual harm team within the safeguarding service.
- Managers and staff take effective action to minimise the impact of domestic abuse on children. Staff have a sophisticated understanding of the dynamics of domestic abuse, particularly concerning women from minority ethnic backgrounds where there may be additional layers of vulnerability. Independent domestic violence advisers are allocated very quickly and domestic advisers from women's communities of origin provide expert advocacy and support.
- An effective system enables staff to have good oversight of the relatively small number of children who are subject to pre-proceedings under the Public Law Outline. Letters before proceedings clearly inform parents about the local authority's concerns, although the language used is overly complex.
- The physical, emotional and mental health needs of children in care and care leavers are a priority. The health of nearly all children and young people in care is thoughtfully considered and they benefit from a wide range of appropriate support services. These include embedded child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), which are quickly mobilised when required. Almost all initial health assessments have continued to take place within set timescales, and more children than expected have chosen to engage in their review health assessments. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children benefit from specialist support, including services to address the impact of trauma.
- Arrangements for keeping in contact with children have been very well managed during the COVID-19 restrictions. Nearly all meetings are now taking place face to face with social workers. Many children have had more frequent contact with their social workers during the recent period and they have responded well to the opportunity to have video calls. Able and committed social workers have shown commendable practice in using imaginative solutions to facilitate contact. They know and care for the young people they work with and have sufficient time to undertake direct work with them and to build trusting relationships.

- Decisions to accommodate children and young people are timely and in their best interests. Children and young people live with committed and supportive carers who demonstrate warmth for the children in their care. Managers have made the best decisions in the circumstances for children when identifying placements, and the placements are well resourced. Matching decisions take good account of the need for children to remain in the same school and to have continuity of staff, friends and learning. Children living at a distance from the local authority have received the same high level of care and support.
- Regular, swift oversight of children who go missing minimises risk and ensures that children have a timely conversation about the reasons for their absence when they return. This has been especially important during the pandemic, when a few children who are in care went missing to see their families. Records of return home interviews demonstrate sensitivity in understanding why children go missing. Where the desire to see their families during the pandemic was a factor in their episode of going missing, sensitive work was undertaken to respond appropriately to children's wishes, and thereby reduce the likelihood of further missing episodes.
- Children have been supported well to maintain regular contact with family members who are important to them during the pandemic. These arrangements have involved a blend of online and physical meetings and are at a frequency and level of supervision to suit individual children.
- Life-story work to help children to understand their histories and why they cannot live with their parents is variable and not always started early enough. A new dedicated post to develop and enhance permanence planning for children across children's services is showing influence and impact. However, both areas are currently underdeveloped and require strengthening.
- The virtual school team has maintained frequent oversight of children in care during the last six months. They have a good focus on the progress that children are making. All children in care, including those placed out of area, had an online personal education plan (PEP) meeting during the national lockdown, and this provided a good line of sight into the experiences of these children. Like all children, the attendance of children in care was impacted by lockdown, but foster carers spoke positively about the support with children's learning that was provided by the virtual school. As with other pupils, this group's engagement with online learning was variable during that period. Over time, school attendance has improved, and currently most children in care attend school well. Effective work to support Year 11/12 pupils into post-16 destinations has helped nearly all to secure a place.
- Children in care and care leavers who spoke to inspectors were generally positive about the support and help that they have received during the COVID-19 period. They valued the frequent contact by phone, text and face-to-face visits made by their social worker or personal adviser. Older care-experienced young people appreciated the practical help that they received, for example

with food shopping or as a listening ear. This helped young people to talk about their fears and anxieties and supported their mental well-being.

- Foster carers spoke positively to inspectors about the support that they have received in order to care for children during recent months.
- Leaders and managers were very proactive in planning for children and their families at the outbreak of the pandemic, introducing child safety plans and central duty teams to deal with urgent cases under the umbrella of the 'critical operating model'. This ensured that there were sufficient staff to undertake direct visits to those children who needed face-to-face contact. Technological solutions supported safe online working for staff and families. Quality assurance processes are effective in the borough and regular audit activity and practice weeks provided leaders with a line of sight to practice during the pandemic. The timeliness and frequency of visits to children have increased, despite COVID-19 restrictions.
- Senior managers made very limited use of the flexibilities available to them by the amendments in regulations. The application of growth funding and close financial management in Children, Schools and Families have contributed to a forecast underspend in that department. However, financial pressures caused by the COVID-19 emergency have arisen from the combined impact of a loss of regular income to the council as well as additional expenditure. As a result, the council overall has a significant budget deficit.
- The multi-agency partnership demonstrates a strong, shared commitment to support and protect children and young people. Effective partnerships with schools, including frequent communication, help to safeguard children and to promote attendance.
- Children's services staff feel well supported, both emotionally and practically. Caseloads for social workers in some teams are currently above the optimum desired. Nevertheless, social workers describe their caseloads as manageable.
- Supervision takes place regularly and is valued by social workers who described both support and challenge during this process. Social workers also benefit from group supervision by embedded CAMHS systemic therapists. Management oversight is consistently evident at decision-making points throughout the child's journey.
- Senior leaders have responded well to the heightened awareness of staff and communities regarding racial inequalities and injustice. They and their staff demonstrate a deep knowledge and appreciation of the many and varied protected characteristics of the diverse communities within the borough.

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

Yours sincerely

Kate Malleson
Her Majesty's Inspector