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Ann Graham
Director of Children's Services
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Dear Ms Graham

Focused visit to Haringey children's services

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.

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Haringey children's services on 9 and 10 March 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors were Kate Malleson, Rachel Griffiths, Tara Geere, John Roughton and Stephen Bentham.

The methodology for this visit was in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. However, the delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. This visit was carried out remotely, 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.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The systems to enable children to engage in return home interviews.
- Quality assurance arrangements for work with exploited children so that the impact of work is evaluated and used to further improve practice.

Findings

- The impact of the pandemic in Haringey has been exceptionally severe. Leaders have a good understanding of the community they serve, which has experienced significant economic adversity. At one point, Haringey had the fourth highest number of individuals furloughed nationally and the second highest number of individuals furloughed in one area of the borough. There are high rates of income support claimants whose income relies on zero-hours contract jobs in the retail and hospitality sectors. In addition, a large minority of the population are of Black, Asian or minority ethnic heritage, who have experienced a disproportionate impact on mortality from COVID-19. The experience of grief and adversity caused by the pandemic exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities and Haringey's children and families have experienced high levels of stress and anxiety.
- Strong, timely and effective political and corporate support for children's services has enabled leaders to respond promptly to mitigate the impact of these unforeseen developments. Additional financial investment from the council supported the entire workforce as it moved unexpectedly to working online. This is also enabling the retention of supernumerary social workers to provide an effective focus on reducing the harmful and enduring impact of the pandemic at a time of increased demand. Local authority leaders have ensured that children in care, both those living in Haringey and those living outside the borough, are provided with technology and, where appropriate, one-to-one tuition to secure their ongoing access to, and continuity of, education. Investment is also enabling impoverished families to be supported to meet their children's basic needs through one-off COVID-19 payments and the delivery of thousands of food parcels. These strategies are being used creatively to facilitate physical access by workers to hesitant families and are providing valuable insight into the daily experiences of vulnerable children and opportunities to support them.
- A determined and collaborative effort by the multi-agency partnership has identified and supported the most vulnerable children. This has improved oversight of children's safety and the quality of education they are receiving, including those being home educated and/or at risk of missing education.
- Partnerships in Haringey have strengthened further through working together more closely. This has hastened positive change and created a culture focused on overcoming shared obstacles. For example, there has been strong and effective collaboration between midwifery, health visiting and social workers to safeguard unborn babies and children under five years.
- Schools comment very positively on the local authority's communication throughout the pandemic and the help provided by the location of school-based social workers. An early help panel was established during the COVID-19 pandemic. This has helped school leaders to navigate and access the range of services on offer to support pupils, particularly those at risk of exclusion.

- The multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) makes effective decisions to safeguard children. Children and families receive a timely and appropriate response that is proportionate to their level of need. Consistency in decision-making is achieved by reference to the threshold guidance and use of Haringey's chosen social work methodology. Although the MASH has experienced a reduction in referrals, a large majority of current referrals are of a greater complexity, involving concerns about domestic violence, mental ill health and substance misuse. There are also significant levels of serious youth violence.
- Decisions about protecting children are informed by good information-sharing in well-attended strategy meetings. The rationale behind decisions is well recorded, but identified actions are not always sufficiently specific and time-bound. Child protection enquiries are conducted promptly and identify both protective factors and concerns. For a very few children, when there is police involvement, there is no strategy discussion and, although work progresses directly for an assessment, the opportunity for wider information-gathering and more informed decision-making may be lost.
- Children who are subject to child protection and child in need plans, including disabled children, have continued to make progress because social workers mostly identify their needs and respond appropriately to them. Despite the pandemic, children have been seen regularly, and alone. There is good multi-agency attendance at meetings to review the progress children are making. For the majority of children, swift action is taken when risks escalate, to ensure that they are appropriately safeguarded.
- When concerns reduce, there are processes for children to be stepped down to early help to receive support proportionate to their level of need. During the pandemic, the local authority has taken an appropriately cautious approach to decision-making about ending or stepping down child protection and child in need plans.
- When concerns are so serious for children, or when progress against child protection plans is not being achieved, matters promptly escalate to child legal gateway meetings and then either into Public Law Outline (PLO) pre-proceedings or to court in order to secure children's safety. Some children benefit from effective work in the PLO because risks reduce, children's experiences improve and they remain safely with their families. However, timeliness of pre-proceedings is an area that has been adversely affected in part by COVID-19, particularly in getting parenting assessments completed.
- Decisions to bring children into care are suitable and the majority of children live in safe, stable homes which are meeting their needs well. Social workers clearly understand the need to mitigate risk and visit children regularly, either virtually or in person, according to their need. Children in care have continued to make progress despite the pandemic, with timely access to health assessments and careful consideration given to meeting their physical and mental health needs. Children living out of the local authority area receive the same standard of

service as those living in the borough. Independent reviewing officer oversight provides good scrutiny and challenge.

- Careful consideration is given and appropriate steps are taken to ensure that children in care continue to spend time with people who are important to them. Decisions about virtual or face-to-face contact take account of risk factors and COVID-19 restrictions. Workers are mindful of the need to observe parental interactions with children when visiting virtually. Contact arrangements for very young children are well considered. The Maya Angelou Contact Centre provides a valuable resource to enable children to see their parents in a safe, child-friendly setting.
- When considering placement decisions for unborn children, planning starts well before birth. Strong pre-birth assessments inform future planning and decisions about where they will live.
- Care leavers told inspectors that they felt safe in their accommodation. They have been well supported by their workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, the Aspirations Panel has signposted young people to different pathways to education and employment to match their career ambitions. Young people have a good understanding about how to live independently due to the effective help they have received.
- Despite the strong strategic focus of the local authority and partner agencies, the reduction of serious youth violence and exploitation remains a stubborn challenge and a priority for the safeguarding partnership. A range of preventative programmes in the community and schools target those most vulnerable to exploitation. This work is supported by the trajectory of consistent improvement in the quality of social work with children and families.
- Children at risk of exploitation receive good support to increase their safety, from a wide range of multi-agency professionals who know them well. Mapping is routinely used to help understand children's circumstances. For some children, the package of support is reducing risk and improving children's experiences. The exploitation panel is increasingly positively perceived as a forum for workers to access support and guidance.
- Despite this, too few children who go missing are encouraged and supported to engage meaningfully in return home interviews (RHIs). Leaders recognise that there is more to be done to achieve children's more valuable engagement and to check that actions identified in RHIs are completed. Systems to identify at the earliest opportunity the children at risk of exploitation are improving but remain underdeveloped. Quality assurance of this area of practice is underdeveloped and the quality of data is inconsistent.
- Quality assurance of practice more generally has been improved by a collaborative case auditing process which considers children's experiences. This has continued throughout the pandemic. Moderation and feedback from families are beginning to strengthen the process.

- The vast majority of staff receive regular supervision, although the quality and impact of supervision are variable. Caseloads are generally reported to be manageable and the impact of supernumerary agency workers is valued by staff. The recruitment of a permanent workforce remains a high priority for leaders.
- Staff are positive about working in Haringey and have valued the exceptional support provided by managers at all levels during the pandemic. Access to personal protective equipment (PPE), regular communication and group counselling has enabled staff who are shielding to develop coping strategies to reduce isolation and create positive routines.

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

Yours sincerely

Kate Malleon
Her Majesty's Inspector