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Robert South
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Dear Robert

Focused visit to Havering 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 a focused visit to Havering children's services on 12 and 13 May 2021. The visit was carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectors, Joy Howick, Nasim Butt, Louise Hocking, Andy Whippey and Julie Knight.

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 fully by remote means. Inspectors used video calls for discussions with local authority staff, managers and leaders. 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 quality of analysis within assessments.
- The rationale for decision-making when stepping down to early help services.
- The quality of supervision notes including the rationale for decisions.

Findings

- It has been an exceptionally challenging year for Havering, with the impact of the pandemic remaining severe. Havering's infection and death rate from the pandemic is one of the highest in the country. The experience of grief and adversity caused by the pandemic has impacted greatly on the local community including the social care workforce, who have experienced stress, anxiety and loss. Despite the recent easing of lockdown restrictions, the prevalence of COVID-19 in Havering continues to significantly impact on how services are safely delivered, by staff and partners, to the most vulnerable children and families.
- Strong, timely corporate and political support for children's services has enabled leaders to mitigate some of the impact of the pandemic. Leaders have led a co-ordinated response alongside their partner agencies. They have swiftly responded to an increase in self-harm, including suicide, across all age ranges and a rise in domestic violence. These strengthened partnership arrangements are enabling a proactive and collaborative effort to support the most vulnerable families at a time of increased demand.
- The council recognised early on the significant impact of the pandemic for families living in poverty. They made significant financial provision for these families, including financial support during school holidays for families of 7,000 vulnerable children eligible for free school meals. Social workers and other practitioners have played an integral role in the council's response to safeguard children during the pandemic.
- Despite the challenges of the pandemic, social care leaders have an accurate understanding of children's services and have maintained a focus on improving services to better safeguard children and to improve their outcomes. However, the pandemic has inhibited the leaders' ability to address some key priority areas, including the recruitment of permanent experienced social workers and managers. Despite best endeavours, a high turnover of front-line staff, and lengthy sickness due to the pandemic, has affected the quality of management oversight and staff supervision. This has led to some children not receiving the help and support they need at the earliest opportunity. In response to this challenge, resources have been secured to recruit to additional senior practitioner posts.
- Staff well-being and safety is a priority for leaders. Staff report that leaders are visible and supportive. On occasions, as a result of colleagues' absence due to sickness linked to the pandemic, social workers' caseloads have been unavoidably high in some teams. For some children, this has meant that they have not seen the same social worker consistently, making it harder for them to build a trusting relationship and share their worries and feelings.

- Social care leaders have built positive relationships with schools and have developed suitable mechanisms to communicate with them, for example through the primary inclusion network. However, the local authority needs to ensure that there is consistent feedback to schools following the receipt of referrals.
- The existing quality assurance framework has been effective in identifying and addressing deficits in practice. Leaders know that there is more to do to address the variability in the quality of children's assessments, plans and supervision records so that they consistently evidence effective management oversight.
- The multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) continues to operate effectively from an office base. Early help has very recently been relocated to within the MASH, so that children are identified at an earlier point to receive a wide range of services to prevent situations escalating to the point where they require statutory services. The MASH provides effective and timely decision-making in response to initial concerns about children. Parental consent is well understood within the MASH. Strategy meetings are held promptly, with partner agencies well engaged to share information. All risks are considered carefully and the rationale for proportionate child-centred decision-making is evidenced within good-quality records. Actions arising are mostly clear, but not always time bound.
- When statutory assessments are required, social workers are promptly allocated to undertake these. However, on occasions, due to the pandemic, there are delays in children being visited by their social worker, meaning that children do not get the help they need at the earliest point. Once assessments are commenced, social workers visit children regularly and work hard to build a strong and trusting relationship with them to inform effective decision-making. For some children, the lack of planned direct work hinders the social worker's understanding of the child's lived experience.
- Assessments are mostly timely with an appropriate focus on risk and need, although some are insufficiently comprehensive and they are not always updated following significant events. This limits the identifying of next steps for focused and purposeful care planning. Historical events are not always sufficiently analysed to inform the level of support to address all risks.
- A small number of children's cases are overly optimistic about outcomes and over reliant on the self-reporting of adults. This has led to step-down to early help before there is enough evidence that risks are addressed, or that there is sustained improvement to children's circumstances.
- Partner agency attendance at key decision-making meetings has improved considerably since the previous inspection. Child protection and child in need plans are detailed and include clear goals. However, some plans lack clarity as to how these goals will be achieved. As a result, some children's plans do not progress at the pace needed to improve their experiences.

- Core groups and child in need meetings are timely but too often overly focused on updating information, rather than providing a clear analysis of progress and evaluation of the current risks. This lack of effective progress checking means that, for some children, there is a delay in escalating children's cases to pre-proceedings.
- Within the pre-proceedings process, letters to parents are of a consistently high standard. However, management oversight on children's records is not sufficiently clear as to how progress is being monitored.
- Social workers and managers in the children's disability service recognised the additional COVID-19 risks for their children. A proactive approach by social workers has ensured that the needs of these children and their families have been met well throughout the difficulties caused by the pandemic.
- Children at risk of criminal or sexual exploitation are mostly well identified. However, risk assessments and action plans to address concerns are of inconsistent quality. Plans have insufficiently clear actions for reducing risk to these children. When children go missing, return home interviews are offered to them and workers are persistent in their efforts to engage those children who decline an interview. While helpful information is gathered in these interviews, it is not always clear how this information is collated to inform planning and interventions to best support such children.
- The decisions made for children to become looked after are appropriate. However, some children would have benefited from an earlier admission into care. Although there are continuing challenges with sufficiency of placements, intensified by the pandemic, the majority of children who come into care live in placements with committed carers that meet their needs well. Effective consideration and analysis of all aspects of children's needs, including those with the most complex profile, ensures that children are matched to the right placement for them.
- Most children in care continue to live locally and family time is prioritised and promoted. Positively, most children continue to attend the same school to minimise disruption and change following their entry into care.
- During the current challenging times of the pandemic, practitioners have continued to find creative ways to meet with children in care. Children in care and care leavers benefit from practitioners who know them well and have a good understanding of children's and care leavers' needs. Children and care leavers spoken to said that they are well supported, have regular contact with their practitioner, and appreciate that senior leaders listen to and take account of their views, to develop better services for them in Havering.
- There is a strong commitment to support effectively the physical and mental health needs of children in care and care leavers. Children have timely initial and

review health assessments and, if required, ongoing mental health needs assessed. Staff make good use of in-house therapeutic support services, such as the team of systemic family therapists and the mental health practitioner in the care-leaving service, to enhance their understanding of how to best support their children.

- Children are encouraged to attend their looked after reviews. Children's views are well considered. The reviews are well attended by partners, and independent reviewing officers have continued oversight to ensure that children's plans progress.
- Care leavers benefit from a dedicated and knowledgeable care leaving service. Young people's advisers are in touch with the vast majority of care leavers and see them regularly. The advisers are ambitious and aspirational for young adults. Most young adults have a pathway plan, although they vary in quality from very good to others that fail to identify and include all known risks.
- The headteacher of the virtual school has a sound understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the virtual school. There appear to be early signs of positive impact with regards to the targeted deployment of the 'systemic team' of therapists.
- Leaders worked well with schools to manage the huge spike in elective home education applications when all pupils were expected to be back in school in September 2020. They have developed suitable tracking and monitoring systems for effective home education and children missing from education.

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

Yours sincerely

Joy Howick
Her Majesty's Inspector