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Dear Sheila

Focused visit to Thurrock 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 pandemic.

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Thurrock children's services on 30 June and 1 July 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Margaret Burke and Anna Gravelle.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for the protection of vulnerable children from extra-familial risk.

This visit was carried out 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. 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. This visit was carried out fully by remote means. Inspectors used video calls for discussions with local authority staff, managers and leaders, and for conversations with children.

Headline findings

Thurrock Council continues to provide effective, responsive services for vulnerable children. Children have remained a key focus for elected members and they continue to be a corporate priority. Leaders have worked with strategic partners to develop a shared 'public health' multi-agency approach to confront risk to children, families and the wider community from child exploitation, gangs and other forms of extra-familial harm. They have strengthened their oversight of services in response to the feedback given at the last inspection, to better identify and engage with vulnerable

children exposed to risk of extra-familial harm, and improved their offer of support to them and their families.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?

- Earlier transition planning for children in care and care leavers who are exposed to risk of child exploitation, gangs and extra-familial harm.
- The involvement of children in the take-up of return home interviews and the information the authority relies on to capture activity and the impact of these interviews.
- The arrangements for support and engagement with children at risk of extra-familial harm; in particular, the agility of services to meet the diverse and complex needs of these children and their families.

Main findings

The local authority has been creative and adaptive throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring the continuity of responsive services for vulnerable children. Leaders have issued guidance and put structures and support in place to ensure the ongoing safety and protection of children and their families, and of their staff. Staff have been consulted and actively involved in shaping future services in preparation for the ending of COVID-19 restrictions.

The numbers of contacts to children's social care during the pandemic have reduced. However, leaders report that children being referred have more complex needs than normal, resulting in a greater proportion of contacts converting to referrals. Effective communication and joint working with schools and partners have ensured that children at risk of extra-familial harm continue to be identified. Multi-agency safeguarding hub thresholds are well understood, and they are applied appropriately for these children.

Children are promptly directed to the most appropriate team for ongoing support. Good multi-agency engagement and cooperation to support children at risk of harm are evident across all service tiers. Whole-family working, supported by the Prevention and Support Service (PASS), is used effectively to address the needs of children and their parents, resulting in improvements in family functioning. Most children receive support at the right time to help reduce the damaging impact of extra-familial harm and to prevent further criminal or sexual harm escalating.

Safeguarding risks are proportionately balanced and sensitively managed, when parents' responses to discovering their child's involvement in harmful situations can be viewed as inappropriate. Child exploitation risk assessments and plans are mostly used well to identify, analyse, manage and disrupt risks. Plans are reviewed in social workers' supervision and overseen by senior managers, to ensure that actions are followed through and any concerns escalated where necessary.

Successful engagement with some children and their parents results in effective direct work. This helps families to act to better manage and reduce risk and harm to their children. Not all families are convinced of the benefits of working together with professionals to safeguard their children. Where families are resistant to help, professional involvement is not always coordinated well enough to engage the family proactively and effectively in the delivery of services, to meet their diverse needs. As a result, some children remain gripped in these harmful situations, beyond their own and their parents' control.

Oversight, tracking and support continue post-18 for care leavers with complex needs who have been harmed and/or are at risk of further extra-familial harm. Transition planning is not started early enough for some young people with complex needs. Post-18 placements are particularly hard to identify when they are needed, and planning and activity begin too late for some young people. As a result, some care leavers, who have already had much to contend with, have had to move home several times within a short period of time.

Senior managers maintain good oversight of all children who are not in full-time education. Effective systems ensure tracking of children's progress and monitoring of their tuition hours. Each child has a plan which considers their return to full-time education, with actions tailored to their individual needs.

Careful attention is paid to referrals about children who are reported missing from home or care, even when risks and vulnerability are deemed to be low. The response to missing children, identified at the last inspection as an area for further development, is now more consistent. Consent is appropriately obtained, and parents and carers are consulted. Routine partner agency checks are carried out and all children are offered a return home interview (RHI). Cases involving children who are repeatedly reported missing are escalated appropriately to strategy discussions for further consideration of risk and protection needs. Risk management meetings maintain oversight of missing children, ensure the timely follow-through of actions and ensure that professionals appropriately share intelligence to reduce incidents of going missing. All children are now offered RHIs. However, while the take-up of these interviews has improved and is currently at 58%, it is still too low. Some children who are reluctant to take up the RHI offer benefit from direct engagement with their social workers after each episode of going missing. However, this activity is not formally monitored; neither is it evident for all children.

When unaccompanied young people go missing for prolonged periods, they are kept under review. In line with good practice, staff continue to make efforts to trace their whereabouts and follow up on any sighting leads. Checks are carried out with the National Referral Mechanism, the Home Office and other local authority areas, and new intelligence considered until their whereabouts are known.

The challenges faced by children involved in child exploitation and gangs are well understood by the local authority and its partners, both strategically and

operationally. Professionals undertake extensive mapping of the most vulnerable children involved in gang-related activities, so these children and their networks are well known. Staff work actively with partners to disrupt gang activity. Specialist workers are tenacious in their efforts to build the trust and confidence of children and their parents. The skilful balancing of needs and risks is producing windows of opportunities which are used to change the trajectory of life for some of these children.

Social workers comply with the requirements of statutory guidance, but this does not always translate into successful interventions and/or outcomes for gang-affiliated children and their families. Standard visiting timescales may not always be frequent enough to build the strong and trusting relationships needed to support and help these children and their families. The throughput of work does not always fit with the need for the long-term engagement so often required to see evidence of sustainable change for them.

Staff quickly identify and respond to risks to children from radicalisation through timely early intervention.

Leaders ensure that children in Thurrock continue to access a good range of emotional well-being support. Services have adapted well to increasing demand throughout the pandemic, with a focus on early support and developing their digital offer. Despite these investments, children are having to wait for specialist emotional well-being mental health services (EWMHS). These services actively maintain oversight of children on their waiting lists, providing advice and support to professionals who are supporting them. For many children waiting for specialist EWMHS services, time-limited interventions are provided through the PASS, youth services and/or the Youth Offending Service. This flexible approach successfully addresses their presenting needs and ensures support for them until longer-term services are engaged.

Senior leaders in Thurrock are visible and are noted by staff to be very personable. There is a culture of openness and learning. Managers maintain good oversight of children's journeys, monitoring risk and the progress of work with vulnerable children through various panels and meetings. Decision-making is clearly evidenced on case records. Supervision is used well as a productive tool to support staff, provide guidance and to develop social care practice with children and families.

Audit is a well-used and embedded quality assurance tool that is fully integrated into the service. Children's life experiences and risks are well considered, as auditors explore what has been done well and what more could be done to help the child or others in similar situations. Information gained from audits informs key performance documents and is effectively triangulated with data. This provides assurance about progress and performance for leaders and managers. Between 10% and 20% of audits are moderated. The information contained in the audits is accurate, but it is not always appropriately reflected in eventual quality gradings. Leaders acknowledge

the need to increase the numbers of audits that are moderated, to help them further develop and embed a coherent and consistent understanding of social work practice and its impact on children.

Staff enjoy working in Thurrock and they feel valued. Good access to relevant training and development opportunities help them gain the skills, knowledge and tools they need to work successfully with children who are at risk of extra-familial harm. Staff are encouraged to progress and develop their careers in Thurrock.

Most social workers have manageable caseloads that allow time to build relationships with children and their families. Many are proactive and persistent in doing so, working to overcome any barriers to engagement.

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

Your sincerely

Margaret Burke
Her Majesty's Inspector