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Dear Steven

Focused visit to Hounslow local authority 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 Hounslow local authority children's services on 14 and 15 July 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Kate Malleson and Tracey Scott. 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. 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. However, the delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. The visit was carried out fully by remote means. Inspectors held discussions with local authority staff, managers and leaders, and looked at a range of evidence. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information, audits of current practice and children's case records.

Headline findings

Leaders across the safeguarding partnership commissioned a comprehensive learning review about the services provided to the small cohort of teenagers at risk of extra-familial harm, following the murder of a young person in Hounslow in 2019. The findings and recommendations are informing planning, priorities and service design for adolescents in the borough. Most children considered to be at greatest risk of extra-familial harm are being identified and receive an appropriate response. However, leaders acknowledge that it is too soon to be able to demonstrate the impact of this work. A significant increase in referrals continues to be a challenge to

workforce capacity; the impact of this is evident in the variable quality of core practice to protect vulnerable children from extra-familial harm.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The routine engagement of children in return home interviews and in the completion and review of assessments regarding extra-familial harm.
- Work with partner agencies to ensure that the threshold for referral and child protection strategy discussions is understood and that sufficient information is provided at the point of referral and in the multi-agency safeguarding hub.
- Capacity in the relevant teams so that all children at risk of extra-familial harm receive a more timely response when they need help and protection, including in response to serious incidents.

Main findings

Senior managers acted swiftly to ensure that the most vulnerable children and families were identified and supported during the pandemic. Staff have been provided with the means to work remotely and to have access to personal protective equipment as needed. The downturn in activity at Heathrow Airport and the associated impact on the local economy have raised the level of deprivation in the borough. Leaders have prioritised a business recovery programme which aims to understand and mitigate known and future possible consequences of the pandemic and tackle local inequalities.

Leaders have designed a clearly formulated and well-targeted approach to tackle the multi-faceted challenges of serious youth violence and wider child exploitation. The strategic approach includes an evidence-based focus on the themes of contextual and individual vulnerability, which were identified in a local systemic learning review of serious youth violence, published in 2020. The approach recognises the critical importance for children at risk of extra-familial harm of staying in education, the support of parents, community engagement, and the development of relationships with children that recognise and respond to their experiences of trauma and loss.

Most children in need of protection from extra-familial harm benefit from the specialist knowledge and skills of the social workers in the adolescent team. Corporate and political commitment and investment have permanently funded and expanded what was a provisional adolescent social work team into a specialist adolescent service, incorporating the youth offending team, PEACE (protecting and empowering against child exploitation) project workers and related family and youth support staff. Although the emergence of gangs and serious youth violence is relatively new to Hounslow, the members of this established team are appropriately identifying and responding to the needs of children at risk of or experiencing exploitation, providing a sound foundation on which to build.

Practitioners routinely identify the trauma in children's lives which has increased their vulnerability to exploitation. Assessments capture family history well and identify

risks and protective factors, including the impact of the lockdowns in some cases. They are strengthened by the use of genograms, ecomaps and specialist assessments regarding exploitation.

Specialist targeted assessments, such as the child sexual exploitation assessment, are used to evaluate the particular risks of extra-familial exploitation and to inform safety planning. Information and intelligence are appropriately gathered from a variety of sources to complete these targeted assessments. The concerns identified are discussed with the child and family. However, these assessments are not routinely completed collaboratively with the child, and the resulting scores which indicate the level of risk are not shared with them. The assessments are not reviewed regularly to establish whether the level of risk is increasing or decreasing, and instead wait until an increased level of risk is apparent. This is a missed opportunity to engage the child in sharing their experiences so as to identify any changes to risk at the earliest point. Peer mapping is used well to identify associates, both peers and adults, as well as locations and descriptions of vehicles of concern. The National Referral Mechanism is used appropriately when required.

From autumn 2020 onwards, children's services have experienced a significant increase in contacts and referrals, resulting in delay for a few children in having their needs met. For these children, decisions to progress to an assessment, although appropriate, are made with incomplete information from partner agencies, either because partner agencies do not provide full information or because the information is not returned promptly. There is not a consistent shared understanding about the threshold for a strategy discussion, and a few discussions following serious incidents are delayed. Although work progresses swiftly to the adolescent team for assessment when exploitation is identified, some of these assessments are not subsequently carried out. The reasons for this are unclear on the case records.

The increase in demand at the front door has caused delay and gaps in work being completed for a small minority of children at risk of extra-familial harm. In some cases, important actions to improve their circumstances are not always being progressed in a timely manner. These delays are further exacerbated by changes of social worker. Despite investment in workforce capacity, increasing demand is having a negative impact across the service. Local authority leaders have taken some steps to address this issue and further discussions are taking place with partner agencies.

When children go missing from home or care, there are systems and processes in place to find them quickly, with 'grab packs', listing known associates, addresses and contact numbers, being used to good effect. However, practice is not consistent; some return home interviews are not completed or offered in a timely way. Many offers of interviews are declined by children and when they do take place, the quality of these discussions is variable, adding little to the analysis of factors which increase or reduce vulnerability. Information obtained is shared with police for the purpose of planning disruption activity. Leaders have already identified the need to strengthen this area of practice.

Many children have good relationships with their social workers and are comfortable talking to them about their experiences. Most children are seen regularly and positive relationships are forged through shared activities such as shopping trips, cooking and paying attention to birthday wishes. Social workers speak with genuine warmth about children. However, some children have experienced too many changes of social worker, making it difficult to form trusted relationships.

The circumstances and experiences of the most vulnerable children in the borough are regularly considered at a senior level. In particular, senior leaders focus strongly on children's education, recognising the relationship between time out of education and the increased vulnerability to extra-familial risk. A range of resources are available to support learning, including education mentoring.

Children's emotional well-being and their access to therapeutic support are well considered. However, the response from the child and adolescent mental health service is variable, with some children on waiting lists experiencing significant delays. Leaders have taken action to escalate this issue with health partners.

When children's cases are allocated, managers are clear about the rationale and the tasks required. Social workers have regular supervision with their managers. However, the reflective practice described by social workers is not consistently evident in supervision records. Actions are not always progressed and are rolled over to the next supervision without challenge, which causes delay in achieving improvement to some children's circumstances.

The regular case auditing programme includes obtaining feedback from children and their parents about the quality and impact of the help that they have received. The feedback from children in particular adds richness to the findings, although contact is not made in every case. The case auditing programme also includes effective challenge through moderation and is helping to develop a shared understanding about what good practice looks like across the service.

Despite the challenges of the last year, most social workers feel well supported by managers, whom they described as knowledgeable, experienced and available. Newly qualified social workers are highly motivated, enjoy their work and are pleased to be offered permanent roles in Hounslow.

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

Yours sincerely

Kate Malleson
Her Majesty's Inspector