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Jenny Coles
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Dear Ms. Coles

Focused visit to Hertfordshire County Council 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 Hertfordshire County Council children's services on 21 and 22 July 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Tom Anthony and Nigel Parkes.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for the protection of vulnerable children from extra-familial harm. Inspectors focused on children living at home with their families, and did not include the experience of children in care or care leavers.

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 on site and appropriate measures were put in place to enable discussions with parents, local authority staff, managers, and leaders and representatives from partner agencies.

Headline findings

Recognising the increasingly complex risks that adolescents can face, senior leaders have made impressive progress in transforming the support provided to vulnerable children aged over 10. A strong and committed Hertfordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership has overseen the development of a range of effective services in response to the threats associated with child exploitation in all its different forms. A high level of awareness of the range and complexity of extra-familial risks means

that practitioners across the partnership are able to identify vulnerable children effectively. Good multi-agency information-sharing and swift risk analysis mean that children receive appropriate and timely interventions that reduce the risks that they face. Supervision is not always sufficiently focused on critically reflecting on children's circumstances and ensuring that plans clearly identify the most significant issues they face.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The quality of children in need plans, with a specific focus on being consistently clear, concise and sharply focused on those issues that matter the most to children.
- The quality and frequency of supervision, in offering opportunities for reflection and the right level of critical challenge.

Main findings

The local authority and its partners have maintained a rigorous focus on protecting and meeting the needs of vulnerable children and young people during the pandemic. 'COVID-19 practice standards' have helped practitioners maintain a high quality of practice despite the restrictions. Leaders take seriously their responsibility to promote the well-being and resilience of their workforce. They have continued to offer a high level of practical, professional and emotional support to staff.

Partner agencies know that protecting children from extra-familial harm is a shared responsibility. Extensive activity to raise awareness and understanding has helped practitioners to identify extra-familial risks swiftly. Schools, police, youth services and health partners play a vital role in identifying vulnerable children. Children on the edge of care or at risk from extra-familial harm receive a rapid and thorough risk assessment to determine the appropriate response.

The Specialist Adolescent Service Hertfordshire (SASH) has emerged as an essential frontline safeguarding service. The service skilfully works with children who are exposed to some of the riskiest situations. SASH workers are skilled and tenacious in their efforts to establish effective relationships with children and their families. Practitioners understand risk and protective factors and succeed in reducing vulnerabilities and improving outcomes for the children they work with.

Providing an integrated, multi-agency service, SASH focuses on young people who are vulnerable to all forms of extra-familial harm and exploitation. Recently judged by HMI Probation as outstanding, the youth offending service is an integral part of children's social care services. Co-located with the four area SASH teams, in different parts of the county, this facilitates a fluid response to the changing needs and vulnerabilities of young people. This makes it easier to manage the risks to which they are exposed, and the risks they present to others.

The 'Prevent' duty is well understood by the local authority and its partners. The Channel Panel is well established. Thresholds are applied appropriately. Children who are at risk of being radicalised receive an appropriate and proportionate response in a way that helps to reduce the risks and diverts them away from extremist ideology and linked groups.

The SASH hub, based alongside the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), operates at impressive pace and with sustained focus to ensure children vulnerable to extra-familial risk are given the right response in the right timeframe. Strong management oversight supports effective information-gathering processes and risk assessment screening. Children who require immediate action are prioritised.

Practitioners recognise that building a trusting relationship is the key to being able to support change and reduce the risk of harm to the child. If children already have a strong relationship within the multi-agency network, this is built upon. In other cases, workers are persistent and patient in their repeated efforts to gain the trust of children.

The SASH central service works alongside the area SASH teams providing intensive support for the most vulnerable children. Practitioners skilfully build relationships with and resilience within the family. They frequently succeed in reducing 'push' factors, while simultaneously establishing multi-agency plans to reduce 'pull' factors toward risk and harm outside of the home.

Immediate help is available for children and families in crisis during the evening or at the weekend from the Rapid Response Service.

Staff are quick to update assessments when needs or risks increase or children's circumstances change. They understand and articulate risks and protective factors clearly. However, some SASH children in need plans are not well written. Worry statements are not always simple and easy to read. Some plans try to address too many issues, making it difficult to understand what the key priorities are and who needs to do what and by when. In that sense, they are not all sufficiently sharp, specific or measurable.

Managers do not always use one-to-one supervision to reflect with social workers on children's circumstances and evaluate plans made for them. When supervision is regular and appropriately challenging, discussions include the tracking of progress of previously agreed plans. Social workers spoke positively about group casework discussions and they value the increasing opportunities, provided by the easing of restrictions, to benefit from discussion with colleagues.

Well coordinated multi-agency packages of support are reviewed frequently, holding practitioners, families and agencies to account and driving progress in reducing risks. Targeted services are used effectively. For example, a specialist organisation works with the 10 missing children who are most at risk at any one time. Return home

interviews are used well to reduce further episodes of children going missing, as well as reduce risks for children when they go missing.

Social workers skilfully support children to re-establish relationships with parents. This provides a basis of support to pursue education and other ambitions. Social workers are attuned to issues of diversity and incorporate this awareness into their work with vulnerable children. They also know that disadvantage can increase children's vulnerability to criminal exploitation, and work hard to improve access to education and housing.

The Hertfordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership has successfully driven the development of a coordinated approach to extra-familial harm, brokering the engagement of district councils, community safety partnerships, schools, the police, health services and voluntary sector organisations. A joined-up approach to tackling serious youth violence, trafficking, slavery, radicalisation, criminal and sexual exploitation, gangs and county lines means that children receive bespoke support tailored to their individual needs.

The emphasis on early intervention and prevention is tangible. Innovations such as the Schools and Gangs Team and locating youth workers in hospitals help to make support for children and families more accessible. Knowing that the two are not mutually exclusive, police partners have adopted a 'disruption first, prosecution second' approach.

New multi-agency child exploitation (MACE) panels replaced the previous sexual exploitation and runaway children (SEARCH) arrangements and have strengthened multi-agency oversight of children at risk of exploitation. Increased agency attendance and improved exchange of information help the formulation of effective risk management plans.

The local authority and its partners use data and performance management information intelligently to monitor frontline activity and understand children's experiences and progress. For example, they collect anonymised knife and assault data from hospitals and use it effectively to identify hotspots and plan disruption activity.

Focused and determined, leaders have mobilised resources, worked in effective partnership and maintained a clear focus on the complex needs of adolescents. Clear pathways ensure that children's individual needs are swiftly responded to. Cohesion between the strategic vision and operational practice means that there is a very real sense of a golden thread between senior leaders and frontline practitioners.

Despite the impact of the pandemic, the local authority and its partners have continued to deliver a range of high-quality training to staff and managers.

Strong performance management and quality assurance arrangements drive continuous improvements. Auditing is used well to review the impact of practice and identify areas for development. Rigorous moderation of audits ensures there is a realistic appraisal of the quality of work undertaken.

A settled and stable workforce, holding manageable caseloads, underpins the effectiveness of interventions with children at risk of extra-familial harm. Leaders have a good understanding of frontline practice. They use research well and are continually seeking ways to develop and strengthen services to help protect and support vulnerable children.

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

Your sincerely

Tom Anthony
Her Majesty's Inspector