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Dear Jacquie

Focused visit to London Borough of Hackney 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 the London Borough of Hackney local authority children's services on 28 and 29 July 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Louise Hocking and John Roughton.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need or subject to a child protection plan.

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 interim 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 partly by remote means. Both inspectors were on site and used either video calls or face-to-face meetings for discussions with local authority staff, managers and leaders.

Headline findings

Dedicated scrutiny by senior leaders and strengthened management oversight mean that children in Hackney are benefiting from improving social work practice when they are in need or on a child protection plan. Risk to children is understood and responded to appropriately. Clear planning and decision-making provide direction and clarity to the work to be undertaken to improve children's circumstances. Strong multi-agency working and comprehensive support packages are contributing to safer outcomes for children.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The quality of written records, to provide a clear understanding of a child's history.
- The case recording system and tools, to support practitioners to complete their social work tasks.
- The inclusion of the voice of the child, their wishes and feelings and daily lived experience, in all case records and reports.

Main findings

There has been a relatively high rate of COVID-19 infection in Hackney and this has had a significant impact on families and staff. The local authority, together with partner agencies, has planned a well-coordinated response that has continued to strengthen over time and has led to sustained improvements across the service. Education partners in the council have worked closely with all colleagues to ensure that vulnerable children have been monitored and supported. This work has led to an education representative being permanently based in the new multi-agency safeguarding hub at the front door of services, ensuring that children's educational needs are identified at an early stage.

In addition to the significant impact of COVID-19, Hackney Council was the victim of a serious cyber attack in October 2020. This resulted initially in the loss of all children's records and it has had a devastating impact on the whole council. Despite the best efforts of the council to retrieve data and written records, practitioners continue to work with a case recording system that does not fully meet practice needs. Some historic information is not available for many children and, as a result, residual risks for children remain.

Practitioners have faced these additional and unique challenges with resilience and resourcefulness. Many social workers in the child in need, child protection and disabled children's services have long-standing relationships with families and know and understand their histories. Partner agencies have been supportive and cooperative in sharing historic information and records continue to be restored.

Current practice shows that thresholds are understood and broadly accurate, meaning that most children are on a child in need or child protection plan when this is needed. This includes disabled children. Decisions to step cases up or down are mostly appropriate in response to changes in risk. Social workers complete comprehensive assessments ahead of child protection conferences. Well-attended multi-agency core groups and conferences assist decision-making and responses to risk for children. Independent reviewing officers maintain effective oversight that includes a helpful mid-point review.

For some children, the time on a child protection plan is brief, three months or less; this indicates some risk-averse practice. For some of these children, the threshold is

too low, meaning that they are having a higher level of statutory intervention in their lives than is necessary. Senior leaders are aware of this and are providing appropriate oversight of this issue.

For children involved in the Public Law Outline (PLO) and pre-proceedings work, decision-making is usually prompt and consistent. A timely response and effective tracking by managers help families to engage in this process and ensure that delay is avoided. When children's circumstances are not improving through child protection planning, the PLO and pre-proceedings work are applied effectively to reduce risk, averting the need for proceedings in some cases. For a small number of children, earlier application of the PLO could have been considered.

Practitioners understand the principles of planning well for children and the purpose of their involvement in children's lives. Comprehensive written care plans provide a structure to this work and are mostly of a strong quality. In a minority of cases, plans are overly complex and detailed and are hard for parents to understand.

Direct work is undertaken to support children and practitioners are skilful in engaging with children, including disabled children, and their families. Practitioners know their children well and speak about them with considerable understanding and care. They focus attention on the individual detail of who children are and what is important to them. Children are seen regularly and alone. The diversity and culture of individual children are understood well. However, this strong practice is not yet consistently captured in all case records and reports for each child to access in the future.

Hackney is at a point of transition, experiencing changes in leadership at a senior level, including chief executive, group director (statutory director of children's services) and the director of children's social care. Effective interim leadership arrangements have ensured that practice continues to improve. Leaders have an accurate understanding of practice in Hackney, with a committed anti-racist focus and attention to well-being for both children and staff. They are particularly well supported by a committed and active lead member for children who ensures that she is fully aware of what is happening for children and oversees improvements effectively.

A review of the social work unit model in Hackney in April 2021 resulted in some realignment of structures and roles. Priority was given to minimising any impact on children, to avoid unnecessary changes of social worker. Some staff have moved teams and/or had a change of manager. There is no unallocated work and management grip has been strengthened. A refocusing of the clinical offer is ensuring that children receive a strong therapeutic service.

A key priority for senior managers has been embedding a culture of increased individual accountability and frontline decision-making, and management oversight. They have adopted a 'back to basics' approach which has included new monthly individual supervision, individual case allocation and the preparation of case summaries. Although these changes are recent, inspectors saw the positive impact

they are having, particularly in management oversight and records of decision-making about children's lives. Clear actions are set and agreed in supervision. The current interim recording systems need some refinement to support staff in completing what is expected of them. They are cumbersome for staff, take additional time to complete and are hard to navigate easily.

Managers and leaders are well informed through an audit process that provides a targeted focus on specific areas of practice that have needed development, such as multi-agency strategy discussions and fuller 'live learning' audits. The audit process does not include a consistent moderation process or detailed follow-up. Managers are aware that this needs to be strengthened and it is part of a new quality assurance process being implemented.

The cyber attack has had a significant impact on the availability of performance and management information. However, senior leaders and operational managers have sufficient systems in place to understand what is happening for children. Some of these systems are labour intensive and do not yet offer the same level of data that was held previously by Hackney. Although children are seen alone, this has not yet been captured in overarching data. Leaders are acutely aware that this requires ongoing work and it is one of the council's highest priorities.

Many staff are very happy working in Hackney and feel well supported through a unique and complex set of challenges. For some staff, the pace of change has been too quick and they have not felt as well informed as they would have liked. The skilled workforce recognises the benefits of the changes and understands that some resetting of baseline expectations was necessary. Senior leaders understand that, having laid solid foundations, there is more work to do to support staff during the ongoing changes.

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

Yours sincerely

Louise Hocking
Her Majesty's Inspector