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Jacqui McShannon
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Dear Ms McShannon

Focused visit to Hammersmith & Fulham children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Hammersmith & Fulham children's services on 19 and 20 January 2022. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Christine Kennet and Brenda McLaughlin.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for 'front door' services, including decision-making and thresholds for referrals about children, child protection enquiries, decisions to step up to children's social care or down to early help (EH), and emergency action out of hours.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. This visit was carried out fully with inspectors on site.

Headline findings

Some exemplary practice was seen on this visit in the 'front door' services for children in Hammersmith and Fulham. Children in need of help and protection continue to receive highly effective 'front door' services that ensure they get the right help at the right time. Strong, aspirational leaders have created a culture of continuous learning where staff report they feel highly valued. Consequently, high-quality child-centred work provided by experienced, highly committed, skilled practitioners and their managers is preventing, and protecting children from, harm. Responses to children at immediate risk are timely and effective. The child's views and lived experiences are central to multi-agency decisions across all 'front door' teams, leading to proportionate action. The recent reintegration of family support teams with children's social care is helping provide children and their families with a seamless service. Senior leaders know their services well and they are unstinting in their efforts to improve and develop practice. They recognise that caseloads within the children assessment teams (CAS) and for some newly qualified workers are too high. They are acting to address this. Additional supernumerary posts have been agreed in family support.

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

- Social work caseloads in the child assessment service.

Main findings

Vulnerable children in Hammersmith and Fulham benefit from effective social care and early help support. Professionals work collaboratively to share information, thus mitigating risk and ensuring that children receive the right level of help and protection.

The recently reintegrated EH family support teams provide innovative, responsive, and continually evolving services. In these teams, skilled practitioners help families with a wide range of needs, including complex difficulties. A range of targeted support is available. For instance, 'The Traded Offer' and 'The Transitions and Resilience Project' are bespoke services in schools. Specialist practitioners support children with emotional and behavioural difficulties to successfully make transitions from primary to secondary school. This is keeping children in education and is helping reduce their involvement in gangs, exploitation, or serious youth violence.

Skilled EH practitioners undertake child-focused assessments using clinician consultations and a systemic trauma-informed approach. This provides an effective framework for the purposeful exploration of risk and need. Effective direct work takes place routinely, and children's views clearly inform decisions about next steps. Rigorous management oversight in the initial contact and resource team (ICAT) and in EH ensures that children's experiences are central to timely decisions about the pathway needed to help and protect them from harm. Most children's cases are appropriately stepped up and down between EH and statutory services when risks escalate and reduce. Actions by managers to improve performance monitoring across EH, as well as audit programmes within children's social care, are positive developments and have helped to target services to those children that need them most.

Thresholds for statutory services are clearly understood in the well-resourced ICAT and in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), which the borough shares with Kensington and Chelsea, and Westminster. Experienced practitioners provide a proportionate response to contacts and referrals. Levels of risk informed by previous history are prioritised appropriately and the rationale for decisions is recorded clearly by experienced social work managers. Consent to share information is routinely sought, or appropriately overridden, to protect children.

Co-located specialist workers within ICAT add real value to practice with specific groups of children and their families, including homeless young people, families with no recourse to public funds, and privately fostered children. In addition, external partners have easy access to ICAT workers' expertise and guidance via a consultation helpline. This helps to ensure children and families receive the right level of service for their needs.

Children at risk of immediate harm are responded to immediately. Multi-agency strategy discussions take place on the same day in the CAS teams. These are well recorded and set out clear actions to progress investigation and assessment. Interventions are proportionate to risk. When children and young people need to be safeguarded, actions are taken promptly to ensure that they are protected, including application to the family court if necessary. Visits are carried out swiftly by CAS staff when they are concerned about children's immediate welfare, and this is a real strength.

Despite exceptional challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic and high caseloads, assessments of children in the CAS are comprehensive and analytical. The teams demonstrate effective, respectful and thoughtful engagement with families. Highly capable social workers work hard to understand parental vulnerabilities and fully consider the trauma adults have experienced. Nevertheless, the need for children to be safe and cared for are uppermost in their analysis and final recommendations.

Management oversight and direction, when cases are allocated and when assessments conclude in CAS, are clearly articulated in children's records. Staff spoke positively about the excellent support available from their line managers, but also from accessible, visible senior leaders. Supervision is mostly regular, with evidence of reflective thinking and planning. Staff morale is good, and many of the agency staff the borough uses go on to take up permanent posts. Social workers make good use of clinical consultations and practice discussions to understand complex cases and find strategies to support work and planning. They use a range of tools to assess and speak with children to ensure their views are present and informing assessments.

Caseloads in the CAS teams and for some newly qualified workers are high, with some social workers unable to attend training or complete work prior to going back onto duty. Some workers said this was beginning to impact on the frequency of how often some children can be discussed in supervision. For some children who no longer need statutory intervention, the process of step down to EH is delayed by the volume of work in the family support service. Despite this delay, no children were left without the services and help they require. Senior leaders are cognisant of the pressures and have a plan to manage the backlog. They are equally aware and have secured additional funding to help reduce caseloads in the family support teams.

Social workers make child-focused plans based on a thorough analysis of children's needs and risks that affect them. Management oversight ensures appropriate challenge and scrutiny, supporting early planning prior to transfer between teams.

A comprehensive quality assurance framework is underpinned by an array of audit activity throughout the year. This helps senior managers understand and improve practice. Recent workshops for frontline managers and the principal social worker have reviewed and supported the consistency by auditors across all audit activity, and a moderation process enhances the quality practice.

Children receive effective support and intervention from the shared out-of-hours emergency duty team. Effective and well-established communication arrangements are in place between the out-of-hours duty team and the 'front door' services. On-call management arrangements ensure that active action is taken, when necessary, outside normal working hours.

Children in this borough benefit from a skilled and stable workforce. Strong pathways through various 'graduate' and 'step-up' to social work schemes have helped to build a strong and varied workforce. Strategic objectives to deliver systemic training, access to clinical support and career progression opportunities support recruitment and retention of workers.

Strategic leadership is strong, responsive and effective and has created an environment where good social work practice can develop and flourish. Staff morale is good, and social workers and managers report that they are valued and respected by a visible and accessible senior leadership team.

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

Yours sincerely

Christine Kennet
Her Majesty's Inspector