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Dear Tim

Monitoring visit to Newham Children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Newham children's services on 3 and 4 March 2022. This was the fifth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in March 2019. Her Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Andy Whippey and Sarah Canto.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- Child in need and child protection planning.
- The response to children at risk of exploitation.
- The 'front door' (the service that receives contact and referrals).

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

Headline findings

The local authority has continued to make sustained and steady progress since the last monitoring visit conducted in September 2021. Tangible progress has been made in areas of weaker practice identified on previous monitoring visits. There is greater consistency in the quality of social work practice. There is still more work to do to ensure that children and young people's needs are consistently met. Leaders have a clear understanding of the areas where improvement is necessary and have robust and realistic plans to address them.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Partner agencies have a shared understanding of thresholds, and contacts to the front door are well managed. Referral information is mostly clear and well defined, although this was not consistently evident in some referrals from health agencies which required further clarification to determine the level of risk to children. Social

workers and managers make prompt, well-informed decisions about what help is required.

Within the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), proportionate checks are undertaken with co-located professionals, who work closely together and collaborate very well. Decisions in the MASH are timely and cases rated as amber and red are congruent with children's level of identified need. Consent is routinely sought, or appropriately overridden, to safeguard children. Once checks have been completed, social workers analyse well all available information, including historical information. Management oversight of this work provides social workers with a clear rationale regarding the next steps to take to support and better safeguard children. When a referral for early help is made following a contact, decisions and support provided are proportionate to the level of need for the child. Inspectors saw some examples of positive, well-recorded work in the Families First Service.

The vast majority of work with children is informed by timely assessments of their needs. Children are seen and seen alone to inform the assessments. Increasing use of chronologies is improving analysis, leading to stronger plans. Most assessments are thorough, with a clear focus on the needs of children and any evident risks, with clear management oversight. A small minority of children who are the subject of assessments are not seen quickly enough given the level of concern identified in referral and historical information.

Social workers know the children they are working with well. In most cases, children are visited regularly, alone where possible, and in different environments as well as at home, so that staff can form a well-rounded view of the child's life. Direct work with children and families is an emerging strength and is consistently taken into account in assessments and plans. This has led to improved outcomes for children and their families. However, children's wishes and feelings are not always recorded well in the child's written record.

Work with children who are affected by issues of domestic abuse is showing clear signs of improvement and increasing impact. Direct work with children is more firmly embedded, helping workers to understand the impact on children of living in such environments. Work with parents, including work with fathers through the 'Caring Dads' programme, is increasingly evident. Joint work with family coaches is having a positive impact for families to effect change. Training in this area has helped increase social workers' knowledge and awareness and enabled them to deliver interventions themselves to families rather than being dependent on referral to outside agencies.

Core group meetings and child in need planning meetings mostly occur at required frequencies, although there is some variability in relation to child in need meetings. Meetings mostly include good-quality and up-to-date information about children and their families, with good engagement from multidisciplinary partners, and consider progress against plans. In a minority of cases, evaluation of children's progress does not lead to changes in plans to further progress planning for children.

Case conferences are held at the right time. In the vast majority of cases, children's circumstances are well considered, with a clear analysis of current needs and any apparent risks. Case conference chairs now carry out a midpoint review between conferences. This is providing better oversight of child protection planning. Such scrutiny not only monitors compliance with designated processes, such as visits and core groups, but provides oversight of the impact of plans on reducing risk.

Plans for children are clear and child-focused, with desired outcomes well identified. In a minority of cases, actions to achieve these outcomes are less well defined.

The effectiveness of panels monitoring the progress of children who are the subject of long-term or repeat child protection or child in need planning, while improving, is not sufficiently embedded or showing impact. While clearly providing a forum for more effective oversight of these cases and a means for updating relevant information about children, there is insufficient analysis of what this means for children's current circumstances and welfare and a lack of clarity as to future actions to enhance children's well-being.

Some steps have been taken to enable the voices of children to be heard in conferences and planning meetings through the use of Mind of My Own (MOMO), but there is still more to do to ensure that children have the opportunity to contribute to all meetings about them, including core groups and child in need planning meetings. Advocacy for children who are the subject of planning to help them attend meetings or for advocates to attend on their behalf is still not consistently evident.

Leaders and managers have invested in a multi-agency coordinated and integrated approach to improve the effectiveness of work with children affected by adolescent exploitation. They have effective oversight of those children most at risk. Social workers show good skill and knowledge in identifying exploitation risks and vulnerabilities that children are exposed to. There is a wide range of approaches and interventions to protect, prevent and disrupt, including support teams to provide intensive relational work with children and families. Social workers plan with agencies to support children in renewing interest in education, training and work and developing positive routines. Children benefit from persistent support from social workers in their attempts to engage with them. Social workers work closely with mentors and youth workers, where such relationships are established. Inspectors saw some good examples of professional curiosity and persistence to support children in high-risk situations, with good safety planning. Actions from exploitation panels in a minority of cases are not well integrated within existing plans for children, such as child protection plans, meaning there is an absence of a plan which includes all actions designed to protect children.

When children go missing, return home interviews are offered and often completed by the same worker to provide consistency for the child. The resulting information is shared appropriately to aid understanding of the push/pull factors and, following this, effective and informative trigger plans produced. However, missing strategy meetings are not always held in a timely manner to reflect the urgency of the situation, due to police unavailability, which has a potential to affect the timeliness of planning actions to help keep children safe.

Social work in the disability team demonstrates professional curiosity and a proactive approach to recognising and responding to child protection concerns. Staff recognise the high levels of vulnerability of disabled children and take the action necessary to protect and enhance children's well-being, while also responding to children's additional needs due to their disability. Recording of visits is written to children to help keep the focus of children at the centre of all work. Workloads in the team have been reorganised so that children who have care packages only have the benefit of increased and dedicated oversight by staff who can respond flexibly where necessary. Team managers can talk knowledgably about children in their service and provide mostly effective oversight and monitoring.

Social workers feel well supported and value the training and development opportunities they have. Senior managers are visible and approachable. Recent reductions in caseloads have enabled social workers to focus on more intensive work with children and families. The local authority has taken positive steps to increase the numbers of social workers in permanent positions. This is starting to have an impact in decreasing the numbers of children who have frequent changes of social workers. This helps children to build relationships with workers.

Supervision is still variable, though the variability is less than seen on previous monitoring visits. The variability centres around the depth of analysis and clear time-bound actions for completion.

Quality assurance processes are improving. Audits identify well any gaps in social work practice. The use of audit is well established, and the local authority now seeks the views of children and parents to help inform an evaluation of the quality of practice. This could be enhanced to include the views of partners, conference chairs and independent reviewing officers. Actions following the audit to help improve outcomes for families are more consistently evident and monitored to ensure completion.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Andy Whippey
Her Majesty's Inspector