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Dear Mr Loades

### **Focused visit to London Borough of Redbridge children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to London Borough of Redbridge children's services on 27 and 28 April 2022. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Neil Penswick and Nick Bennison.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for the 'front door'.

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

### **Headline findings**

The last time Ofsted visited the London Borough of Redbridge was in 2019, when it carried out an inspection of its children's services. At that point, inspectors described front door services as 'outstanding' and 'a model of efficiency and excellence'. Those services included screening and assessment, the emergency duty team and the early help triage team. Since then, senior managers have further developed the front door, which now also includes the domestic abuse Reach Out service and single points of contact for contextual safeguarding and children's mental health. This visit confirmed that the front door has continued to provide a high-quality service, an impressive achievement given the pressures of the last two years due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there are issues about the attendance of partner agencies at multi-agency strategy meetings.

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

- Continuing to work with the local safeguarding partnership, partner agencies and the Metropolitan Police to improve attendance at child protection strategy meetings and to improve the timeliness of police notifications.

- Recording the decision-making and monitoring of progress when advice is given by the front door to other agencies that they need to complete a written multi-agency referral form (MARF).

## **Main findings**

The response to contacts and referrals at the front door is highly effective. Apart from urgent situations, the vast majority of contacts from other agencies are submitted as detailed and clear MARFs. Inspectors saw a very small number of non-urgent contacts where agencies had reported concerns for children but had not completed a MARF. Screening officers had appropriately advised them to submit a MARF, but this advice had not been recorded and there was no monitoring to ensure written referrals were completed promptly so that services could be put in place in a timely manner to help the families concerned.

Contacts are responded to promptly by screening officers, who check the information and update children's records. Managerial oversight is a significant strength. Managers immediately review information coming in about children, set timescales for responding and provide clear direction about what actions need to take place. Further information is gathered either by the qualified social workers in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) or the early help triage team, depending on the nature of the issues being reported.

The Metropolitan Police notifies the MASH when they are called out to incidents which involve children. However, on some occasions, there are delays in the notifications being made or they are not produced at all. Senior managers in children's services have raised this issue with senior colleagues in the police.

Consistent application of the local authority's multi-agency threshold document ensures that children and families who need help are promptly identified and supported through the Families Together Hub (FTH) and the wide range of coordinated early intervention services available in Redbridge. The front door is fundamentally making the right decisions as to the level of support families need. Only a small number of children and families referred to early intervention services later need children's social care intervention, when there are changes in their home situation. Where intervention needs to be stepped up to social care, decision-making is clear. Professionals communicate well with families and the changes which have led to the step-up are explained well to them. Step-up situations are appropriately and promptly responded to by the MASH and allocated to the child protection assessment teams (CPAT), who carry out a child and family assessment to identify families' support needs. The Harmony team, located in the FTH, provides an excellent additional service for families on the edge of children's social care.

Once professionals identify concerns about domestic abuse, the response is very strong. Dedicated workers based at the front door carry out further work whenever there is a contact which raises concerns of this nature. Inspectors saw exceptional work from the Reach Out service, which was established during the COVID-19

lockdowns to help families affected by domestic abuse. The range of support available addresses the needs of families, ranging from situations of the highest level of domestic abuse risks to one-off incidents and verbal arguments where parents could potentially benefit from early support. Practitioners make strenuous efforts to communicate and to work with both parents and this perseverance results in many families having their needs met promptly. Further evident strengths of this service are the robust consideration of risk by the Reach Out workers, co-working with social workers in the MASH to evaluate concerns and the continuing strong child-focus throughout. Support services, including Spotlight and Sahara, provide a highly effective, coordinated response to families' needs.

The out-of-hours service is an integrated part of the front door. It is managed by Redbridge on behalf of three neighbouring boroughs, with discrete arrangements for each borough. The work undertaken out of hours for Redbridge is timely and proportionate to children's and families' needs. The information gathered and action taken are quickly relayed to daytime services, ensuring a smooth transition of work into the MASH service.

When it is identified that further support may be needed from children's social care, referrals completed by the social workers in the MASH are detailed and timely. There is clear management oversight of the progression of referrals.

Over the last year, only a small number of children have come into care in an emergency, owing to serious concerns for their safety. Decision-making for children in these circumstances is appropriate and timely.

Child protection enquiries are thorough, clearly documenting the voice of the child and providing a detailed analysis of risk. When robust action is needed to safeguard children, this is undertaken quickly and in a way that is sensitive to their needs. Effective management oversight is reflected in the record of the enquiry itself and on children's case notes. Investigations show careful consideration of risk, and actions identified at strategy meetings are followed up. Practitioners visit the parents and children and seek their views. Even when the decision has been taken to discontinue section 47 enquiries, practitioners continue to complete a child and families assessment, to identify strengths and areas needing support.

Senior managers made inspectors aware before this visit that the participation of other agencies at strategy meetings has been a persistent problem since the COVID-19 lockdowns. Participation by the Metropolitan Police has been limited, and attendance by health and education services has not returned to pre-pandemic levels. Children are not being put at risk as a result of these deficits, but professionals are faced with additional work to gather vital information after the meetings. In a small number of children's cases, strategy meetings are being delayed to ensure all key agencies are present.

Local authority data shows that a significant proportion of child protection enquiries do not result in an initial child protection conference, and that conferences do not

always result in plans needing to be made. In most of these children's cases, it is appropriate that a strategy meeting takes place, due to the high levels of concern being reported. However, some children's needs could be responded to as effectively through a child in need assessment. Regardless of this, the work undertaken is of a high quality and provides a beneficial level of support for the children and families concerned.

Assessments are completed by the CPAT teams. When referrals are received by these teams, managers give workers prompt and excellent guidance on what work needs to happen and by when. Child and family assessments are of a high quality. Other agencies are consulted. A strength of practice in Redbridge is the importance given to the voice of the child. This is an integral aspect of work with families, with children seen regularly and direct work undertaken with them, usually over several meetings. Workers in the assessment teams make considerable efforts to involve all parents, to identify what further support their children need. There is excellent consideration of previous history and the current circumstances. Diversity and ethnicity issues are also well considered. Strengths and concerns are identified. The analysis is succinct, child-focused and orientated to the support needed. Research is appropriately used to provide further context for the concerns. Managerial oversight is of a very good quality. As a result, assessments provide a holistic picture of the child, ensuring that service provision is at the right level and reflects their needs.

Children with disabilities receive thorough assessments. Their disabilities are clearly documented, and their impact for them and their families is well considered. This results in plans that identify and provide services that meet the children's and families' needs.

Senior managers know their services very well. They understand and accurately describe services and areas needing their increased focus. They use an impressive range of performance management and quality assurance tools to manage their service and to know how they are impacting positively on the lives of vulnerable children and their families. Quality assurance audits are robust and comprehensive, focusing on the quality of frontline practice, supporting processes, management oversight, recording and, importantly, on the outcomes of the work. The judgements auditors make are appropriate and follow logically from their evaluations. Managers and social workers follow up on any actions identified, ensuring a consistently high quality of service delivered to children and families.

Staff talk positively about how much they enjoy working for Redbridge children's services and of the high-quality support they receive from managers. Workers who are new to the service or undertaking new roles receive effective induction and increased supervision. Supervision is regular for all members of staff and is both supportive and challenging, to develop both workers and the service. All workers have access to good levels of training specific to their role and their development needs. This is clearly connected to their professional development and the conversations taking place in supervision. Social workers reported that their caseloads are at a manageable level.

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

Yours sincerely

Neil Penswick  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**