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Dear Ian

Focused visit to Kingston upon Thames children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Kingston upon Thames children's services on 17 and 18 May 2022. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Tracey Ledder and Louise Walker.

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

Statutory functions for children and families in Kingston are delegated to Achieving for Children, a not-for-profit community interest company which is jointly owned by the local authority. The local authority has ensured a clear line of accountability and effective scrutiny and support for senior leaders.

The director of children's services (DCS) is a strong advocate for children. He leads an experienced, stable senior leadership team that strives to ensure that children and their families receive good-quality services.

Children who are referred to Kingston's 'Single point of Access' (SPA) because there are concerns about their safety or welfare receive a child-centred service from capable and dedicated staff. Consideration of children's needs is strengthened by the co-location of partner agencies, who share information to inform next steps. By integrating child and adolescent mental health services within the SPA, leaders have helped to ensure a proactive response to support children's mental health.

When there are clear safeguarding concerns, contacts are expedited quickly to ensure that decisions in respect of children are made promptly. However, there are inconsistencies in the application of strategy meetings. As a result, professionals are not consistently making the best use of multi-agency information-sharing to make informed decisions about next steps for children.

Assessments are of good quality and started quickly for children and their families. Children's voices are generally strong and creative direct work with them informs the assessment process. Children and their families receive support and interventions quickly and alongside the assessment process.

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

- Consistent and appropriate application of strategy meetings.
- The early recognition and response to domestic abuse concerns.
- Consideration of children and families' ethnicity and culture at the earliest opportunity.

Main findings

Children and their families are at the heart of social work practice in Kingston. This is achieved because services for children are driven by an aspirational, child-focused and dedicated DCS who leads by example. Leaders understand what is working well and areas that need strengthening.

Decisions made by staff working at the front door are mostly timely and appropriate. Where there are clear safeguarding concerns, they are quickly responded to.

The quality of information provided by partners is mostly good. Information-sharing reflects the model of practice that is firmly embedded in social work practice. Referrals clearly outline risks and concerns and the impact for the child.

A recent focus on writing information in a child-friendly way is becoming established. This means that, if children wish to read their records, they can better understand how and why decisions about them have been made. Some records contain too much jargon that is difficult for children to understand.

There is some ambiguity about the process and purpose of strategy meetings. As a result, there is an absence of multi-agency information-sharing to support decisions about next steps for some children and, at times, single-agency investigations take place prior to arranged and/or requested strategy meetings. This prevents a multi-agency approach to plan next steps and agreeing how best to proceed.

The arrangements in respect of the designated officer are effective. Thresholds are clear and understood by partners. Partners access good support and advice when they request it. The service quickly identifies when concerns escalate and respond accordingly.

Sensitivity to ethnicity and culture underpins effective practice by the designated officer. This has a positive impact for children who are potential victims of abuse, and for their families. This focus on ethnicity is not yet consistent across all areas of the service, in particular in the early stages of the child's journey.

Out-of-hours services for children and their families are strong. Professionals respond promptly to concerns for children and their decisions and actions are appropriate and clearly recorded. This means that daytime services quickly follow up actions required.

Not all arrangements for assessing and managing domestic abuse happen early enough for the child. Families do not always receive the effective and early support they need.

Children's assessments, including those for children with a disability, are good. Staff see and speak to children without delay. They undertake meaningful and sensitive direct work with children, using a variety of tools. This helps staff to better understand the child's journey and experiences, and to identify the right support for children and their families.

Contingency planning for children is weak. Not all contingencies are detailed enough and some fail to provide the information required, for example what the arrangements are for children in an emergency.

Social workers work creatively with children at risk of exploitation. Sound assessments underpin strong, relationship-based work. This is having a positive impact for children. More children are engaging with return home interviews after going missing; this is particularly notable where there are multiple episodes. Children are seen in a timely way and records of interviews are detailed, capturing children's experiences and worries in their own words. Comprehensive mapping exercises take place, giving social workers and leaders a strategic understanding of contextual risk.

Children and their families receive good support from early help services. Staff assess their needs quickly, seeing children alone as part of their work. Leaders have ensured that a good range of services is available, and the newer multi-agency systems they have put in place dispense with the need for children and families to be formally referred before they get the help they need. Some capacity issues are currently creating delays for families in small parts of the service; these are tracked and understood by managers.

Leaders understand the impact that COVID-19 has had, and continues to have, on children and their families. Leaders have seen an increase in demand for services and are taking steps to make sure they increase capacity. Some caseloads are higher than leaders would like, and this additional strain has led to some inconsistencies in practice. However, they are finding creative ways to help social workers, for example in the use of social work assistants. They have launched a recruitment drive with new initiatives aimed at increasing capacity.

Leaders continue to develop quality assurance processes. Audits provide a balanced and analytical evaluation of practice. Most audits are of good quality. They clearly explain any shortfalls and highlight good practice well. Audit moderation is a significant strength as it brings additional scrutiny and challenge. This work supports learning and helps to strengthen front-line practice with children and their families.

Leaders have created a compassionate, nurturing culture and working environment. They provide staff with good-quality training, support and professional development pathways. Staff are positive about working in Kingston. Most staff receive good-quality regular and reflective supervision. Staff well-being has been a strong focus throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and it continues to be a high priority for senior leaders. Staff appreciate this and feel valued and cared for.

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

Yours sincerely

Tracey Ledder
Her Majesty's Inspector