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Dear Ms Flinders

Focused visit to Waltham Forest local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Waltham Forest local authority children's services on 25 and 26 May 2022. Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) for this visit were Russel Breyer and Victoria Metheringham, with Teresa Godfrey, HMI designate.

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.

Headline findings

Inspectors found that effective performance regarding the arrangements for children in need or subject to a child protection plan has been maintained in many aspects. Children benefit from positive and helpful relationships with committed and enthusiastic social workers and their lives improve. Social workers visit children regularly and are supported by a stable and experienced leadership team, effective specialist resources and strong partnership networks. Services for adolescents at risk of harm outside of their families are especially strong. Some workers have high caseloads or are working with children whose needs are beyond their level of experience, and there are some weaknesses in the frequency and effectiveness of supervision. These limit the pace at which social workers can effect change but, despite this, children make progress. Families report feeling very well supported and they value the service that they receive.

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

- The regularity, quality and recording of supervision.
- The size of caseloads for some workers.

Main findings

Assessments are child-focused, thorough and support the development of effective plans. 'Language that cares' is used throughout assessments, planning and reports, meaning that writing is caring, respectful and free of jargon. This helps children and their families to understand what needs to change and how they will be helped.

Most child protection and child in need plans set out clearly what is needed to keep the child safe and to bring about change. The links between multi-agency risk assessment conferences and child protection planning for children living in households affected by domestic abuse have been strengthened; this was an area for improvement at the most recent inspection. Social workers see children as individuals with distinct needs, even when they are part of a large family group. Plans are individualised according to the needs of the child or children in the family. However, a small number of plans are focused on the needs of the adult, and some do not specify actions that are sufficiently SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound).

Child protection plans are updated at child protection conferences and at the regular core groups, to reflect changing need. Families are included in the meetings, their views are listened to and they inform the planning. Most child in need plans are updated at well-attended child in need meetings.

Partnership working is a particular strength in Waltham Forest. Partner agencies make meaningful contributions to plans, both in helping to formulate them and in contributing to the work with the family. Core groups and child in need meetings are well attended by relevant partner agencies. Partners contribute their skills, expertise and resources to help families to progress. Social workers understand the value of effective partnership work and communicate well with partners.

Visits to families are given a high priority. Frequency of visiting is good and is maintained, even when workers have high caseloads. Children are routinely seen and engaged during visits. Observations of children are well recorded, as is the voice of the child. Children are listened to and what they say informs the work. Children respond really well to this approach and progress is made.

Workers build effective relationships with parents and carers, working at the family's pace to develop trust. This creates an environment in which positive changes can be made. Social workers make persistent and determined efforts to engage fathers in the work, not just to seek their views, but also to encourage them to be involved and to contribute.

Workers feel well supported by their managers. First-line managers are accessible and responsive. Senior managers are visible and approachable. Some supervision is effective at setting objectives and actions, giving purpose to the work to drive change, although for too many social workers there are significant gaps when

supervision has either not taken place or is not recorded. In too many cases, supervision is not used to review the child's plan as a matter of routine, or to check that agreed actions have taken place, and managers do not set out clear expectations about actions and timescales. This means that plans are not driven as effectively as they could be in all cases, and some visits lack purpose. As a consequence, some children have child protection and child in need plans for longer than necessary.

In common with many other areas, Waltham Forest faces significant challenges in recruiting and retaining staff. Senior leaders are well aware of these challenges and have designed a number of initiatives to address them. Some workers have caseloads that are too high for them to do effective direct work with families to bring about change in a timely way.

A small number of newly qualified social workers hold child protection caseloads that are too complex for their level of experience. They have not been receiving the support that they need to respond to this level of risk. This has created a vulnerability for them as workers and could mean that risk and needs are not addressed for children. Senior leaders were unaware of this, but took swift and appropriate action as soon as it was brought to their attention. Management oversight was also strengthened immediately.

Help provided to children at risk of extra-familial harm and to their families is exceptionally strong. Multi-agency arrangements are effective, with a good range of well-designed services that workers can call upon. Services are engaged early and are able to address risks before they escalate. Children are rightly seen as vulnerable children and not criminalised. Workers advocate well for this. A range of specialists support this work, but social workers are also skilled at working with children who may be at risk. Local communities are engaged effectively. Work takes place across many levels of need, supported by a 'one panel' approach, which brings the widest possible range of knowledge and expertise to bear. This reduces risk and leaves families better able to cope.

The leadership of children's services is stable, and leaders work collaboratively with partners, members and corporate colleagues. Leaders understand the community and its needs very well. Children's services are a high priority across the council. There is a very strong awareness and understanding of equality and diversity issues, which are ingrained across all levels and inform services and practice. Leaders are open and honest about the challenges in the area. They listen to feedback and act upon it. Quality assurance arrangements are effective, enabling leaders and managers to take informed action to improve services.

Families gave very positive feedback to inspectors about the services that they receive and how they have been helped. One parent said that she feels well supported and described a skilled, diligent, responsive social worker who advocates strongly for her child. Another parent described how she had experienced responsive

support in a crisis, with sensitive, thoughtful practice, effective direct work and strong advocacy for the child to be seen as a child, and not as the sum of his vulnerabilities or behaviour. The worker supported the parent to make use of the strengths in the family and rebuilt the parent's confidence. The work overall has left the parent feeling able to cope, with a small amount of ongoing support.

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

Yours sincerely

Russel Breyer
Her Majesty's Inspector