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20 July 2022

Sarah Newman
Bi-Borough Executive Director of Children's Services
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Dear Ms Newman

Focused visit to Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea children's services on 15 and 16 June 2022. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Tom Anthony, Margaret Burke and Nhlanganiso Nyathi.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for the protection of vulnerable children from extra-familial risk.

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. They looked at a range of evidence, including children's records. They talked to children and parents, practitioners, and managers and leaders, including the independent scrutineer of the local safeguarding children partnership.

Headline findings

Children who are vulnerable to extra-familial risk receive excellent support from social workers and partner agencies. Carefully crafted safety plans address issues that make children vulnerable. Leaders work tirelessly with a broad range of partners and commissioned services to promote awareness and understanding of extra-familial risks. As a result, professionals can swiftly identify vulnerable children and ensure that they and their families receive early and effective support to mitigate risks. Social workers have a highly developed approach to supporting change for children and their families. Workers are passionate about improving children's safety and creating opportunities for them. Leaders and practitioners continually drive innovation and development of practice, recognising the evolving nature of extra-familial risks. They continuously seek to improve the impact of the support they provide.

Main findings

Senior leaders have developed highly effective partnerships with external agencies and commissioned services. This, and a strong corporate commitment to children in the borough, enabled an effective response to the impact of COVID-19. Leaders recognise that ongoing recovery work is essential to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on children's education and development. They are determined not only to help children recover from the disruption to their education, but to ignite their enjoyment and passion for learning.

Strong relationships developed in this context with schools and other partners mean that there is a shared understanding of the levels of support that children require. Professionals have a good understanding of vulnerability and share concerns about children who may be at risk. In schools, for example, professionals are alert to changes in children's attendance or behaviours that might indicate risk of extra-familial harm, quickly notifying either the early help service or locality social work teams. Well-staffed duty systems in each locality provide capacity to rapidly assess incoming referrals. Duty managers make appropriate threshold decisions and record next action recommendations before work is allocated.

The multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) is used to gather information to support planning and provides a single point of notification for children reported as missing. These children are offered safe and well checks by the police, including by safer schools' officers. Careful consideration to identify the worker who has the strongest relationship with the child helps encourage children to engage in return home interviews, which are undertaken by practitioners they know. There is a thorough, timely, proportionate and effective response to children who go missing, including strategy meetings when children have had repeated or lengthy periods of being missing.

Professionals in the early help service provide intensive support for children. They have a good awareness of extra-familial harm and swiftly gain an understanding of the push and pull factors present for children. The very strong relationships that they have with local schools and a range of agencies help them to co-create plans with families and mobilise effective targeted support. They know how important engagement with education and training is, and they work tirelessly to keep children in school.

Swift, decisive action to share information enables the development of safety plans for children who have been exposed to significant risks. Strategy meetings convened rapidly ensure that agencies understand the risks that children face. There is good attendance and engagement from partners, although health are not always present for meetings.

Plans focus on reducing risks and identifying actions to promote the safety of children, their families and the workers involved. When children are placed out of borough as part of their safety plan, receiving children's services departments are notified swiftly to ensure they are aware of safeguarding risks.

Leaders have developed strong relationships with police services. The effective exchange of information enables child-centred planning and strengthens borough-wide mapping activity to identify risks and plan disruption activity. Specialist workers within the community safety directorate work closely to share information, identify risks and to support some of the most vulnerable children.

Practitioners visit children frequently and routinely undertake direct work with them. This helps workers to understand children's experiences, and provides an opportunity to address concerns and explore children's views, wishes and feelings about their lives. Practitioners work skilfully with parents too, and can draw upon specialist parenting input to improve relationships within the home. Workers understand families' individual identities and circumstances. They work skilfully to acknowledge the impact of differences, so that they can engage and safeguard children in diverse communities effectively.

Assessments, including specialist exploitation risk assessments, are thorough. Professionals work in partnership with families to create focused and detailed plans that are reviewed regularly. Responsibility for improving children's safety is shared with families and other agencies.

Leaders and practitioners have developed an innovative approach for children vulnerable to extra-familial risk. An alternative pathway, using adolescent at risk meetings, supports effective and appropriate information-sharing to help professionals and families assess risk and formulate safety plans. Leaders have recently defined timescales for these meetings, to ensure the pace and momentum of progress is maintained for all children.

Plans for vulnerable children are monitored regularly by the lead officer for exploitation, who provides advice and support to workers. Team-based exploitation champions help ensure that information is shared at the serious youth violence and child sexual exploitation panels and changes in children's lives are reflected in the plans made. Promoting safety is at the core of this work. A specialist senior gangs worker undertakes skilful and tenacious direct work with some of the most vulnerable children, agreeing to meet children and families in locations and at times that enable a trusting relationship to be developed. Specialist commissioned agencies work intensively with children who are criminally exploited.

Progress for many children is evident through their improved engagement and attendance at schools and training providers. Children develop positive, trusting relationships with workers, helping them to develop their understanding of exploitation and promoting their resilience in the face of persistent risks. Workers

identify the trauma that many have experienced within their families and invest time in improving relationships within the home.

Children who have been trafficked and exploited are identified as victims of modern-day slavery and there is innovative work being done to improve the way in which the National Referral Mechanism is used to benefit children. Appropriate use is made of Prevent arrangements when concerns about radicalisation are identified, albeit for small numbers of children.

Few disabled children have been identified as vulnerable to extra-familial harm. The approach to reducing risk for these children is less well coordinated and opportunities to review progress with families and agencies do not happen as frequently. This results in some drift in holding families and agencies to account for the progress that children are making.

The wider needs and issues of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are well considered, and good attempts are made to address all their needs, including accommodation, education, physical and mental health, culture and friendship. They receive sensitive and appropriate support despite the fact that many of their placements are out of area, making it more difficult for them to fully access and engage with the authority's services and community support.

Leaders have created a highly coherent and effective approach across all parts of the service, to support change in families and improve children's circumstances and safety. Building and sustaining relationships with children, families and other partners is central to this approach. Workers receive high levels of training to develop and embed a consistent, thoughtful and effective model of practice. Manageable caseloads mean that workers have time to get to know and understand children's lives. They receive regular supervision that provides them with an opportunity to reflect on their approach to reducing risks, as well as ensuring that children's progress and support is being monitored.

Practitioners universally enjoy working in Kensington and Chelsea. Leaders have created the conditions for highly effective work with vulnerable children and as a consequence many practitioners stay and work in the borough for long periods. Staff value the fact that they remain a child's social worker from the point of initial allocation onwards, even when the child's plan changes, including if they come into care. This allows them to develop and sustain relationships with children and their families for as long as statutory support is required.

Children and parents told inspectors how much they valued the support that they receive during difficult periods in their lives. They described how workers have helped to improve relationships and reduce conflicts within the home, as well as the support provided to reduce risks from harm outside the family.

Leaders maintain a tight grip on performance information. This, and oversight by the exploitation lead officer, helps managers and leaders to know which children are vulnerable. Audit activity is used well to provide a line of sight and reflection on the work that practitioners have done. For some children, however, recommendations from audit are not carried into supervision, which means that opportunities to improve the impact of support may be missed.

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

Yours sincerely

Tom Anthony
Her Majesty's Inspector