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Dear Ms Newman

Focused visit to Westminster children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Westminster children's services on 15 to 16 June 2022. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Kendra Bell and Teresa Godfrey

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. Inspectors were on site for the duration of the visit. They spoke to children, young adults, workers and managers, and scrutinised performance management and quality-assurance information and children's case records.

Headline findings

Children at risk of extra-familial harm receive excellent support and services in Westminster. Protecting children and supporting their families are at the heart of a whole-council, partnership and community-based approach. Senior leaders and partners understand the interconnected complexities and barriers to tackling exploitation. They critically evaluate the impact partnership work is having on improving children's lives. They strive to identify children who are at risk but invisible to services. They have fostered a culture of compassion and high support, which is mirrored by staff in their work with children. A consistent quality of practice, a clearly articulated value base, effective professional development strategies and the stability of a diverse, skilled and caring workforce provide a solid foundation for the work to improve children's lives and safeguard them from extra-familial harm.

Main findings

Senior leaders use information effectively to understand the experiences of children at risk from extra-familial harm, and those who go missing. They know their most

vulnerable children, and how well they are being helped and protected. They monitor risks and support children's progress. Senior officers and elected members of the council ensure that a collective responsibility for safeguarding children is embedded across the council. Senior leaders, managers and workers have kept a clear line of sight of children at risk in the community during the pandemic, continuing to provide support and services to address its impact.

Well-developed information-sharing helps senior leaders and partners understand which children are at risk, the harms that they face and the places in the community where they are most vulnerable. A shared strategic ambition underpins the work of productive local partnerships, including the Children's Local Safeguarding Partnership and Serious Youth Violence Board. These forums ask challenging questions and critically evaluate the impact services have on reducing risk for children. Performance management information and quality-assurance activity are used well to identify and explore emerging themes, and to target frontline work and service development to safeguard children from risks outside the home.

A robust prevention agenda, and effective early intervention and multi-agency support, are embedded across services. Senior leaders and managers focus on strengthening protective factors and what helps most to keep children safer and in sight. They work closely with schools and alternative education providers to raise awareness and understanding of extra-familial harm. This supports children to stay in or return to education and is a key protective measure for many children. Schools identify risk of extra-familial harm at an early stage and take action to get children the right support. An impressive range of activity programmes and support is available for children through schools, early help, youth and community services. This helps to build children's self-esteem, and give them confidence and positive experiences, diverting them from risks effectively.

The work of the Integrated Gangs and Exploitation Unit (IGXU) continues to evolve to reach more children in new ways. The breadth and depth of programmes and community-based work that the unit delivers are impressive, far-reaching and creative. Skilful multi-agency work is undertaken in communities, schools and alternative education provision with children who are at risk of serious youth violence, exploitation and gang affiliation. The non-statutory approach taken is effective in engaging three quarters of children referred, bringing positive changes to many children's situations.

A highly motivated and skilled exploitation lead provides knowledge and advice to support practice at critical moments in time for children. Working with a network of team champions, the role brings rigour and consistency to managing risk of extra-familial harm. Regular information-sharing meetings involving managers, social workers and other professionals build intelligence that strengthens children's assessments, interventions and plans.

Relationships are at the core of work with children. Practitioners work tirelessly to overcome barriers and are tenacious and persistent in getting to know children. They see them regularly and build trusting and enduring relationships that help children talk about their worries and experiences. This enables workers to understand what will help to keep children safer and reduce risk. Workers make best use of a dynamic 'safeguarding adolescent risk assessment' tool to shape their thinking, and develop a clear understanding of the risks children face, and to plan their next steps.

Social workers take time to understand the needs of children who are referred to children's services. They gather further information and take prompt action where there are immediate risks to children. Professionals understand thresholds well and identify risks of extra-familial harm clearly. Decision-making is timely and soundly based on a good range of information. Children are quickly signposted to the right service and for the most relevant support. Early help assessments identify children's needs, vulnerabilities and risks of extra-familial harm. Workers use a range of direct work tools to understand children's relationships and experiences. They bring a 'team' around the family, creating multi-agency plans and achieving positive change. Children's plans draw on an impressive range of resources, including therapeutic family-based interventions and specialist support from the IGXU when needed.

Social work assessments are comprehensive and analytical, and they include brothers and sisters. Strengthening and repairing family relationships are a key focus for work with children at risk. Workers show huge tenacity and perseverance to build trusted relationships with hesitant children and to engage and support parents, even when they are resistant. This helps to improve family life for children and creates stronger, protective networks for them. Children's plans are clear about what needs to happen to reduce risks, and to achieve and sustain positive changes. There is an unrelenting focus on education, activities and positive opportunities that help build ambition for children, develop their skills and divert them from harm. Workers regularly review their plans with children and their families, and with relevant professionals. They recognise the significance of small steps as big wins and as meaningful progress for children.

When concerns for children escalate, workers use multi-agency strategy meetings and a range of specialist professional meetings to accurately assess risk. These meetings are well attended and they result in clear actions to reduce and mitigate risks. For a small number of highly-vulnerable children, risk is high. Targeted multi-agency work is overseen by senior managers who take decisive action when risks remain too high. This includes appropriate use of legal protections. Workers are well supported by managers at times of heightened risk and uncertainty for children. A small number of children need to enter care, and this helps to keep them safer. Social workers are robust in their assessments and support plans for children in care. They identify and address any continuing risks for children. Where there are plans for children to return home, they carefully assess risk and move at a pace that enables risk to be mitigated. A small number of children go missing from home and care; workers are responsive and get out to see them quickly on their return. They

identify networks and locations and seek to understand what children are running from and to, and why. They use these insights well to inform plans to reduce episodes of going missing from home or care. This information is also used by the exploitation lead to understand wider contextual risks and identify other children who may be at risk.

Workers understand the needs and experiences of children seeking asylum in the context of trauma. Timely referrals to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) ensure that vulnerability is recognised. Workers are strong advocates for unaccompanied asylum seeking children. They recognise and respond to risks of modern slavery, trafficking and exploitation. Senior leaders are piloting a new localised NRM approach to help minimise delays in decision-making. There are some early indicators that this approach is having a positive impact for children. When children are at risk of radicalisation, their needs and situations are understood, and appropriate safeguards put in place.

Senior leaders in Westminster are ambitious for children. Senior leaders are visible, caring and innovative. They use research skilfully to inform new strategies, and trial new approaches to engaging and supporting children at risk of extra-familial harm. Effective governance, systems, policies, operational manuals and practice handbooks bring consistency to practice and help staff to work effectively with children and families. Workers value the training they receive in the preferred practice model. They have good access to clinical support and supervision. Senior leaders, managers and staff consistently demonstrate the values, principles and practice standards involved.

There is a strong culture of shared learning and reflection across the service. Regular feedback from children, families, partners and agencies leads to changes that improve services to children. A comprehensive range of quality-assurance activity, performance management information, complaints and learning from individual casework provides senior leaders with an accurate insight into the quality of practice for children. Audit conversations are a collaborative, reflective and very rich exploration of the child's needs, plans and progress. Workers value the audits as an opportunity to explore, formulate and share hypotheses. However, it is not clear how the depth and richness of the audit conversations, which often identify new ideas and hypotheses, are best used by managers and workers to inform the focus of the work with children.

The skills, passion and energy of workers are a huge strength for the service as a whole. Manageable workloads enable staff to focus on their practice, reflect on their work and invest in their professional development. Workers genuinely enjoy their work and would not change anything about working in Westminster. They feel supported by managers and value regular and reflective group and individual supervision. Senior leaders are aware that, for a small number of staff, supervision is not always regular and may vary in depth and detail, and does not always lead to

clear actions to help monitor the progress of the child's plan. Senior leaders have plans in place to address this for staff.

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

Yours sincerely

Kendra Bell
Her Majesty's Inspector