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31 August 2022

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Dear Mr Thomas

Focused visit to London Borough of Tower Hamlets children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to the London Borough of Tower Hamlets children's services on 26 and 27 July 2022. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were John Roughton and Nhlanganiso Nyathi.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in care.

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

Headline findings

The vast majority of children in care in Tower Hamlets are living in placements that are meeting their individual needs well and helping to improve their experiences and progress. Senior officers and elected members have led a strong recovery, and their high aspiration to improve services is firmly apparent. Despite the demographic challenges of poverty, deprivation and diversity in the borough, the leadership team and stakeholders in Tower Hamlets have embarked on an ambitious trajectory of improving services for children in care. Leaders know their services well and have a clear vision and appropriate priorities which they are pursuing through a comprehensive improvement plan. Political leaders are committed to ensuring the availability of resources required to make these improvements.

This was the first visit by Ofsted to Tower Hamlets since the COVID-19 pandemic. The borough was hugely affected by the pandemic, with a significant impact on children, families and the workforce. Workers were well supported and valued by the organisation through this extremely challenging time, with hybrid working arrangements ensuring that staff were not isolated and remained part of a team throughout.

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

- Governance arrangements in overseeing children missing from care and at risk of exploitation.
- The refocusing of family group conferences to reduce potential delays in care proceedings.

Main findings

Children in care in Tower Hamlets benefit from committed social workers who build positive relationships with them and understand their needs and wishes well. Social workers use a range of age-appropriate direct work tools to build trusting relationships. Children are helped to understand their journeys into and through care in this way. High-quality life-story work is carried out with them as they progress to permanence.

Children do not come into care unnecessarily, and every effort is made to support children to remain with their families and kinship networks, including internationally if in the child's best interests. Where this is not possible, appropriate alternative placements are promptly identified. Children are matched in placements on the basis of religious, cultural or language needs as far as possible. A small number of children entering the children's social care system between the ages of 16 and 17 are placed in supported accommodation settings, appropriate to their assessed needs.

Leaders and managers are creative and innovative in addressing children's needs for stability and care. When children have to change placements, careful planning takes place to ensure a smooth transition which supports the children's progress. Placement stability is a key focus for senior leaders and frontline staff, and significant efforts are made to prevent unplanned placement moves, through the deployment of the edge of care service and family group conferences (FGC).

Children receive very effective support from the virtual school, enabling them to reach their potential in education and beyond. Each child has an allocated teacher from the virtual school. Detailed and tailored termly personal education plans ensure that children's progress is well understood and sustained. Creative use of the pupil premium plus funding supports a wide range of enrichment activities. This means that children are able to pursue hobbies and interests of their choosing, developing their confidence, skills and experiences.

Children's progress is supported by effective independent reviewing officers (IROs), who develop meaningful relationships with children. IRO summaries following reviews are routinely written to the child in age-appropriate language. This helps children to understand how important decisions about their lives have been reached.

Children's case files reflect some variation in the quality of recording practice. Better files contain case summaries and records of visits written to the child, so that if the

child wants to see their records in the future, it would be clear to them what was happening when and why, and how decisions were reached.

For some children entering the Public Law Outline phase or care proceedings, viability assessments are being commissioned too late. Greater consideration could be given to the value of FGCs being used as children need to come into care, to more quickly identify potential family and kinship carers. Senior leaders are tackling this and a range of other factors that are contributing to delays in case completion, including court availability. They have put an action plan in place to address these issues and timeliness is starting to improve, to help children achieve permanence as early as possible.

The 'Lifelong Links' service is enabling children to rebuild relationships with family members as they get older. There are no international boundaries to this work. This means that children are developing a greater sense of identity, security and support networks into adulthood, and risks of isolation are reduced.

Social workers for disabled children have a good understanding of their complex needs and any increased risks due to additional vulnerabilities. Social workers are effective advocates for disabled children. They escalate issues to their senior leaders and other stakeholders when additional resources are required. This practice ensures that children's needs are prioritised and the quality of their lives improved.

For the very few children in care who are remanded in a custodial setting, social workers work collaboratively with appropriate professionals to ensure children's needs are met. Risks are minimised, with careful planning for their return to the community.

When children in care go missing and are at risk of exploitation, risk assessments and safety plans help to safeguard them. Monitoring arrangements are in place to respond to and escalate concerns. However, these systems are not sufficiently effective or consistently applied to ensure that all children's circumstances on return following episodes of going missing are fully understood and responded to, to mitigate ongoing risk. Leaders and staff are taking action to improve the quality of return home interviews. Performance measures and governance arrangements in this area of practice need to be strengthened to support the work of this committed team and improve outcomes for children at risk of exploitation.

There has been a recent increase in the number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) in the borough. Workers undertake timely assessments and provide suitable accommodation for them, responding to their unique and often traumatic experiences. These children's educational, emotional and physical health needs are well met. For those UASC whose relatives are identified, appropriate assessments are undertaken to address any potential risks to children.

Children are enabled to attend and engage with a wide range of participation and co-production activities, and their 'wish list' is actively informing the revision of the

corporate parenting strategy. These activities help to grow children's confidence and self-esteem, and to ensure that they understand their rights and entitlements.

The corporate parenting board provides effective scrutiny of the service, incorporating children's feedback to focus on improvements. Regular internal and external audits and other child-centred quality and monitoring measures ensure that leaders understand service strengths and weaknesses and identify opportunities for improvement. There is no complacency in the organisation and leaders are keen to strengthen and consolidate the progress made so far.

Placement sufficiency, increasing the number of foster carers, viability assessments, and the quality and timeliness of agency checks are prioritised within the permanence strategy. Children's carers are carefully recruited, assessed, trained and supported to enable them to deliver positive care and experiences for the children.

Appropriate pathways to permanence are open to all children, with a strong focus on supporting reunification in family and kinship care. Children are matched and settled as quickly as possible.

Social workers are highly positive about the leadership and organisational culture in Tower Hamlets. Manageable caseloads, regular and reflective supervision and access to training and development opportunities through the social work academy are all helping to ensure a stable, high-quality workforce. This means that children are enabled to build effective and supportive relationships with committed, skilled and highly motivated social workers.

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

Yours sincerely

John Roughton
Her Majesty's Inspector