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Dear Judith

Focused visit to London Borough of Ealing children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Ealing children's services on 18 to 19 October 2022. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Andy Whippey and Nicki Shaw.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for the 'front door', the point at which the local authority, alongside other agencies, considers and responds to referrals about children who may be in need or at risk of harm.

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

Headline findings

Since the local authority's last inspection in 2019, the service received by children and families at the front door has improved as a result of a clear focus on improving this fundamental part of social care provision for children. A significant area for improvement at the time of the previous inspection was the quality and timeliness of responses to referrals about children who may be in need or at risk, including child protection strategy discussions and enquiries. The vast majority of children now have their needs identified, assessed and responded to in a timely manner. There is a well-developed response from partner agencies, which supports professionals to work in an integrated way with the most vulnerable children and families. Reporting mechanisms are now focused on front door activity and provide an accurate, up-to-date picture of performance in key areas. There is a strong focus on learning and improvement, with regular audits and a good understanding of both areas of strength and areas for development.

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

- How clearly key decisions, the rationale for them and agreed actions and their timescales are recorded in the minutes of strategy discussions.
- How consistently and how quickly the outcomes of referrals and assessments are communicated to partner agencies.
- Consistency and effectiveness of response to young people aged 16 and 17 concerning their rights and entitlements when provided with accommodation.

Main findings

Children in need of help and protection are identified promptly by staff in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). Children's often complex needs are responded to well and they receive appropriate support. The screening of referrals is detailed, timely and appropriately RAG-rated (Red-Amber-Green) in relation to risks and protective factors. There is effective information-sharing with a wide range of partners within the MASH.

The management rationale for decision-making about next steps is clearly recorded in children's records, which helps social workers to prioritise their work and to respond quickly to children's needs and vulnerabilities.

The consent of parents, carers and older children to carry out enquiries is consistently considered, though in a small minority of cases this is not recorded, particularly in relation to which agency checks are being undertaken. Consent is only overridden when children's circumstances warrant this, and the rationale for doing so is routinely recorded. The provision of specialist posts in the MASH, such as a domestic abuse advisor (reflecting the high level of referrals about children for whom domestic abuse is a concern) and a mental health specialist, supports effective safety planning for children.

The thresholds for different levels of intervention are appropriate and well embedded in practice, and when immediate risks to children are identified the response is swift and effective.

The outcome of actions taken as a result of referrals and assessments is not consistently shared with partner agencies. Partners reported having to sometimes chase this information in order for them to understand the outcome of such interventions.

The local authority has a comprehensive early help offer that provides children and families with access to a range of targeted and universal services. Thresholds are well understood, and when children whose needs can be best met by early help services are referred to the MASH, they are stepped down appropriately to ensure a timely assessment and response to their needs. When children's needs increase or risks escalate the need for stepping up to statutory social work, intervention is

appropriately considered. Assessments conducted by Supportive Action for Families in Ealing (SAFE) are detailed and comprehensive and consider children's needs well. Timely and proportionate action is taken when children need a social work response outside of normal office hours. Information necessary to inform decision-making for children is appropriately shared and out-of-hours social workers can access the children's electronic case records to inform their decisions about how best to protect children. The interface between the out-of-hours service and daytime services is well established and effective, and this helps support timely and appropriate responses to children and families.

Child protection strategy meetings are mostly timely and identify risks appropriately, including those risks relating to the criminal or sexual exploitation of children and children going missing. Most child protection strategy discussions are attended by a wide range of agencies to ensure robust information-sharing and decision-making. Decisions, the rationale for them and agreed actions are usually recorded well. However, in a minority of cases, recording lacks sufficient detail and clarity about the rationale for decisions and actions are insufficiently specific, often lacking timescales for their completion.

Child protection enquiries mostly consider children's histories appropriately and collate relevant information from partner agencies to inform next steps. Outcomes from such enquiries are well matched with children's levels of need and risk.

When children's cases progress from the MASH for a social work service, assessments are well written, with clear evaluations of strengths and risks. Assessments are timely and provide appropriate recommendations for next steps. Effective initial and ongoing management oversight gives workers clarity about the actions they need to pursue. The need to understand the experiences of children in assessments is well embedded and children are typically seen a number of times in different settings, with constructive direct work undertaken. The unique identity and cultural needs of children and families are explored well in assessments.

Assessments for disabled children identify children's needs well, including the impact of their disability on them, and the impact of their interrelationships with brothers, sisters, parents and other family members. They are detailed and thorough.

While the initial response to children at risk of immediate harm is swift and effective, further visits to children as part of assessments are delayed for a minority of children. This prevents the further exploration of risks to these children being completed in a timely manner.

The use of specific vulnerability tools enhances social workers' understanding of exploitation risks to children. Oversight of how these tools are used by the

exploitation coordinator strengthens the oversight of, and response to, risks for these children.

An extensive awareness campaign has resulted in Ealing being able to identify a number of children in private fostering arrangements. This has resulted in children receiving timely assessments and plans that respond to their needs. Children are seen regularly, and direct work tools are used to engage them. Private foster carers and children also receive good support from a dedicated private fostering social worker.

When older children are homeless or are at risk of becoming so, the response is timely and appropriate, including providing dedicated supported accommodation. Assessments undertaken by the specialist housing worker are thorough, reflecting not only children's needs for accommodation but also their wider support needs. However, children are not given sufficient explanation of their rights and entitlements when they are provided with accommodation. This limits their ability to make informed choices as to whether they wish to be 'looked after' by the local authority and, if not, what other support is on offer to them.

Schools are positive about the impact of the Social Workers in Schools (SWIS) programme. Schools said that the SWIS programme enables them to seek advice quickly and helps children to access support. Schools reported that these posts have helped them to build stronger relationships with parents and that this is enabling conversations to take place with them in relation to their children.

The local authority has engaged well with key partner agencies in Ealing and now has strong and effective working relationships with them. This is helping to promote improved outcomes for children and young people. The MASH strategic group, chaired by the Ealing Safeguarding Children Partnership chair and scrutineer, has influenced and promoted change effectively in terms of practice improvements and development. Partner agencies spoke positively about their relationship with Ealing children's services.

Senior managers have a coherent approach to performance and quality management. They make regular use of detailed data to identify areas for further scrutiny, which in turn helps to identify areas of stronger and weaker performance. Regular audits of practice enable the local authority to have a window on the quality of practice with children and families.

Staff reported positively about working in Ealing. Managers are working hard to create a learning organisation and are receptive to feedback from children and families, staff and partner agencies about the quality of practice. There are regular opportunities for staff to engage with managers, who are visible, accessible and supportive. There is a staff forum chaired by the director of children's services; this provides an effective opportunity for staff to share any workforce challenges. Staff told inspectors that they are kept informed of the outcomes of any actions from this forum.

Social workers spoke positively about supervision and group supervision and said that they value the opportunity to reflect on their practice and to be able to talk through concerns. Supervision records are generally detailed, providing clear outcomes and timescales for action. Management oversight is consistently evident on children's records and provides detailed analysis and helpful direction.

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

Yours sincerely

Andy Whippey
His Majesty's Inspector