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Dear Tim,

Focused visit to children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Camden children's services on 31 October and 1 November 2023. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Naintara Khosla and Russel Breyer.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need and children subject to a child protection plan. Inspectors considered children's experiences and progress, the application of thresholds, step-up and step-down arrangements between children in need and child protection, children on the edge of care, children in need at risk of family breakdown and children subject to the Public Law Outline (PLO).

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

Headline findings

At the last inspection, in April 2022, the overall effectiveness of services was judged to be outstanding, and the experiences and progress of children in need of help and protection were judged to be good. This focused visit found most children continuing to benefit from experienced leadership of services, good corporate and political support, a committed, well-trained workforce and resources which helps children to progress. A recent transformation of service delivery has enhanced support to staff and strengthened management oversight, so that children receive the right level of services to meet their needs. Most children benefit from timely help, with clear plans and evidence that risk is reducing.

Leaders and managers know the areas that need further development. They are focused on the improvements necessary for an effective quality assurance framework that maintains their line of sight to social work practice and reflects collaborative engagement with staff and families. Leaders recognise there is more to do to embed

the new structures, so that management oversight and decision-making consistently progress timely, child-centred intervention.

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

- Evaluation and challenge of social work practice through effective quality assurance processes.
- Management oversight of practice and timely decision making to progress children's plans.

Main findings

Senior leaders' active involvement with social workers, the community, and hearing directly from children, ensure that they understand the needs of children and families in Camden. Leaders have put projects in place to alleviate poverty for vulnerable children. They promote innovative diversionary activities to reduce youth violence and demonstrate a tangible commitment to anti-racist practice. Children influence policy, and young inspectors are listened to, so that changes are made to help children's voices to be heard. Good political and corporate support, including funding for the children's services transformation programme, are helping to improve children's lives. Council leaders have welcomed the new Executive Director of Children and Learning, and the 'fresh eyes' he brings to the service.

Social workers are skilled, knowledgeable, and passionate about their work with children. They use a bespoke range of direct-work tools to meet individual children's needs. They understand the needs of individual children in large, complex families and tailor their intervention to support them well. For most children, direct work is done well by social workers, who see them alone and build trusting relationships with them. Social workers assess children's needs through observation, play and regular visits in different environments, for example, home, school, or with health care professionals. They are mindful of children's home life and their living environment. They work sensitively towards a shared understanding between parents and children, so that risks are reduced.

Social workers for disabled children articulate children's disabilities and health care needs well. Social workers thoughtfully develop bespoke care packages and consider added pressures on parents during holiday periods.

Children's care needs are discussed in supervision, so that children benefit from activities and parents are provided with opportunities for respite. However, for a small number of disabled children, visits are not sufficiently prompt and presenting risks are not fully assessed.

Children identified by staff in the multi-agency safeguarding hub as needing assessment are swiftly supported at the right level of social work intervention. Social

workers understand the child's needs and lived experiences well, and this helps to inform an appropriate response. Staff ensure that multi-agency strategy meetings are held quickly when there are concerns for children's safety. These are well attended by the multi-agency partners, who give full consideration to risks, agreeing clearly defined actions to protect children.

Most children's assessments are timely and comprehensive. They include the cultural aspects of family life and take account of children's diversity. Assessments identify risks and lead appropriately to child protection conferences or child in need plans. A good range of community resources and strong partnership working help most children and families to make positive changes. For most children, managers record comments on assessments and provide a clear rationale for their decisions. Managers often chair core groups and child in need reviews, providing good oversight of planning and helping to ensure that children make progress.

Child protection plans contain detailed actions, and the multi-agency network shares responsibility for progressing children's plans. The language in conference reports is not always compassionate and supportive of parents' experiences. This means that their views are not always validated. Feedback from young inspectors helps leaders know what is important to the families and children who attend these meetings.

Local multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC) meetings are well attended by a wide range of partners, who contribute their specialist knowledge and resources to plans that address domestic abuse. MARAC information is effectively translated into child protection and child in need plans, which focus on the essential steps necessary to reduce the risk of abuse. This skilful work helps to protect both adults and children.

The needs of children at risk of criminal exploitation are well understood, with prompt responses to modern day slavery issues. Professionals work conscientiously to safeguard children, planning responses to protect them from significant risks of violence from gangs. Professionals engage children and create opportunities for diversion from criminal exploitation through local projects, for example, helping them gain valuable work experiences and skills to increase their employability.

Where pre-proceedings work is effective, assessments are well-coordinated and clear. In these cases, timely decision-making concerns about risk are progressed to the court arena, so that children are safeguarded. Family group conferences successfully engage wider family support, making a positive difference to children. However, some children are subject to pre-proceedings for prolonged periods of time without significant progress of their care plans. These children experience drift and delay and remain in pre-proceedings too long. The last inspection highlighted the need to improve letters before proceedings, so that parents understand what needs to change for children. Senior leaders recognise that pre-proceedings work is still an area for review.

Management oversight is evident in most children's records, ensuring clarity of decision making. Better management oversight provides specific steps and timescales needed for children's plans to progress, with swift implementation of earlier actions. In some cases, management oversight is less specific, and children experience delay in the progression of their plans.

At a strategic level, partnership arrangements bring agencies together to ensure that the needs of the area are understood, services are developed, and children's identified needs are met. For example, partners are working together on a neglect strategy that helps professionals to understand the impact of neglect for children. Leaders and partners recognise that a small number of children experience cumulative harm, as repeat child protection plans alleviate risks 'in the moment' but do not lead to sustained improvements in their circumstances. Leaders acted during the inspection to review the arrangements of these children and progress their plans.

Leaders meet regularly to share performance and practice information that helps them to progress agreed service priorities. Rich performance management data is informing areas for improvements in social work practice and helping senior managers to track and monitor progress. There is a commitment to a learning culture, with valuable, honest multi-agency contributions to understanding lessons from child safeguarding incidents. However, this learning is not always cascading to frontline staff. Quality assurance is in place, with significant auditing activity providing information for senior managers. However, a lack of consistent collaboration with staff and with families, and limited moderation of audit activity weaken its impact on practice improvement. Some staff are unaware of auditing processes and activity. This is a missed opportunity.

Workers enjoy working for Camden. They appreciate the opportunities of working in a diverse community, with flexible working arrangements and well-managed caseloads, enabling them to spend time with children and to effect change in families. Corporate and political leaders place immense value on social workers and the difficult work they do. They recognise the importance of considering their well-being and controlling caseloads. They have secured resources to embed service changes, aiming to strengthen the environment for social work practice to flourish.

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

Yours sincerely

Naintara Khosla
His Majesty's Inspector