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Ana Popovici  
Director of Children's Services  
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Dear Ms Popovici

### **Focused visit to Wandsworth children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Wandsworth children's services on 23 and 24 November 2023. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Nhlanganiso Nyathi and Andy Whippey.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for the 'front door'. They considered child protection enquiries, emergency action, children's assessments, decisions to accommodate children, and decisions to step up from and step down to early help. They also considered local authority designated officer (LADO) decisions and the response to 16- and 17-year-old children who present as homeless.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers and managers. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

### **Headline findings**

Leaders have maintained a clear focus on improving children's experiences, building on the progress seen at the last ILACS inspection in November 2022. Children benefit from an increasingly mature partnership and a stable workforce, and a mostly effective service response to their needs. Decision-making, management oversight and social work practice in response to contacts and referrals are strong in most children's cases. Practitioners and managers work collaboratively with partner agencies to ensure that children and their families receive the right levels of support at the right time. Most 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless receive an effective service, although the initial responses for children in this cohort are not fully consistent. Leaders know where there is more to do to further strengthen practice with children and their families.

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

- Initial responses to arrangements for homeless 16- and 17-year-olds.
- Recording of any advice given by LADO.

## **Main findings**

Overall, decision-making and the response to contacts and referrals at the front door are strong. Children receive help that is proportionate, timely and reflective of their presenting needs and the level of risk.

Thresholds are well understood and appropriately applied. Children's histories, their lived experiences and family circumstances are routinely explored. Children's cases are risk assessed according to the presenting information, and management oversight provides clarity about decision-making for children. When immediate safeguarding concerns are apparent for children, the response is immediate and reflective of the level of risk.

Parental consent is routinely sought. However, the rationale for seeking parental consent is not always explained to parents, and some do not fully understand what is expected of them.

Multi-agency partnership working has matured, and information-sharing by partners is effective. The local authority has developed purposeful relationships with key partners, strengthening communication and engagement since the last inspection. This ensures that information shared between professionals is clear and accurate, supporting a good understanding of need, risk and children's lived experiences and progress.

The daily intelligence-sharing meetings involving co-located MASH partners are a strength. The meetings are appropriately constituted, with good representation from the main MASH partners and a range of specialist professionals who collaborate and share good-quality information. The meetings enable an effective and prompt response to concerns about children who come into contact with the police, including children who are arrested overnight, are missing or are at risk of exploitation.

Decisions made in the MASH to request early help support are appropriate and consistent with the level of need and risk. Some children have experienced delays in receiving this support, although the situation is improving. Workers have not always informed parents and carers of the reasons for any delay, and the re-evaluation of risk and need or decision-making during this period is not always prioritised when families are waiting for support. Once provided, meaningful work has a positive

impact for children. Management oversight is clear, with an informed rationale as to next steps.

Strategy meetings are held promptly when children's circumstances warrant it. They include good representation from partners, particularly schools. Health information is provided by the health worker in the MASH. However, there is a gap in health information from GPs, which is often of significant relevance. While there is good consideration of relevant information, actions from strategy meetings do not always include explicit timescales for the completion of actions and how quickly children should be seen. There is some variability in how fully children's experiences are considered, particularly when they have been the victim of assaults.

In a small minority of cases, social work analysis is too optimistic. Managers are good at identifying when this is the case. They provide a clear analysis of known information, resulting in a level of intervention that reflects the known information about risks facing children.

Social workers visit children regularly and purposefully, to understand risks and needs. They undertake creative direct work with children, ensuring they gain a clear sense of their wishes, feelings and concerns. They work sensitively with parents to explain the concerns professionals have about their care of their children.

Most assessments are timely, proportionate and purposeful. They are co-produced with parents and children and are child-focused. Some assessments and plans are written to the child. Plans are informed by clear analysis of children's and families' circumstances. Social workers reassess children's needs when circumstances change, ensuring suitable and appropriate plans are in place to provide the level of support required. Effective supervision and management oversight progress child-centred plans and timely actions.

The emergency duty team (EDT) responds effectively to out-of-hours contacts. They interface effectively with the daytime service through emailing risk-rated overnight contacts to the MASH duty desk, to ensure referrals are picked up in a timely manner. All EDT staff are trained as approved mental health professionals and they receive strong reflective individual and group supervision.

The introduction of more focused quality audit activity since the last inspection has strengthened LADO processes. Decision-making is proportionate and timely and ensures the protection of children. The LADO has been diligent in challenging when police investigations have taken too long to conclude. There are some gaps in the recording of conversations with parents and partners.

Quality assurance activity is well developed and audits add value to leaders' oversight. Some audits do not focus enough on evaluating the quality of key

processes, such as children's assessments, plans and reviews, and the impact of practice on children's well-being.

The provision for 16- and 17-year-old children who present as homeless or are potentially homeless is stronger than found at the last inspection. Dedicated and caring workers listen to children. Assessments are generally stronger, with children's needs and risks assessed carefully and quickly, beyond the presenting issues. Workers actively pursue mediation to keep children with their families.

Work with this cohort of children prior to them becoming looked after is not consistent. There is a gap in some children's understanding of their rights, with some not supported well enough to make informed decisions about care and later entitlement to after-care support. For some children, there is an absence of decisive planning, and the impact of moving between different addresses and lacking stability is not given enough attention.

Emergency action taken to protect children is proportionate and timely. In these cases, children's immediate safety needs are well articulated and addressed, resulting in effective and appropriately focused planning. This means prompt action is taken to safeguard children and to meet their immediate wider well-being needs.

Workforce stability is improving, and manageable caseloads at the front door help practitioners build meaningful relationships with children and families. Leaders remain focused and determined to build on this.

Social workers across front door services are positive about working for Wandsworth. Most supervision is timely, but there is some variability in its quality and impact. Staff describe a supportive work environment and culture, in which they feel highly valued by managers and leaders, who are accessible at every level, determined and focused on improvement, and this commitment is evident and tangible.

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

Yours sincerely

Nhlanganiso Nyathi  
**His Majesty's Inspector**