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Paul Hewitt
Corporate Director People Services (Interim)
Harrow Council
Civic Centre, 2nd Floor, South Wing
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Dear Mr Hewitt,

Focused visit to London Borough of Harrow local authority children's services.

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to the London Borough of Harrow local authority children's services on 9 and 10 October 2018. The inspectors were Kate Malleson, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Diane Partridge, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors considered the local authority's arrangements for children who need help and protection. Specifically, they considered the 'front door' arrangements, including decision-making in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). They also considered transfers within early help services, the effectiveness of child protection enquiries and the MASH response to specific groups of vulnerable children.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers, managers, partner agencies based in the MASH and early support practitioners based in early support hubs. They also observed multi-agency meetings and considered the local authority's performance and quality assurance information.

Overview

There is strong corporate leadership in Harrow to improve outcomes for children and their families who need help or protection. Since the previous inspection of children's services in 2017, there has been a sustained commitment to improving the quality of social work practice. Senior leaders know the service well, as reflected in the recent self-evaluation. A comprehensive suite of performance data informs this knowledge.

Inspectors found sound social work practice within the MASH, as well as in the first response team. Child protection concerns are quickly identified and lead to timely interventions to safeguard children and protect them from harm. Social workers know their children well and are confident and competent in their work.

The violence, vulnerability and exploitation team, together with MASH partner agencies and specialist practitioners, is effectively engaged to facilitate holistic planning for children. This input adds value because it ensures prompt information-sharing, the consistent application of thresholds and an appropriately proportionate response for children and families who need help and support.

The local authority has clear strategies in place to promote early intervention and support and continues to develop and embed the redesigned model of early help. When their needs are first assessed, there are a wide range of services and scheduled programmes and activities to support children and families. Written feedback from children who have taken part in a leadership programme demonstrates that they value and have enjoyed the experience.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The more consistent partner engagement in strategy discussions and associated meetings.
- Further development of the existing audit methodology to increase the focus on the impact of practice to improve outcomes for children.
- Measures should be embedded to improve the evaluation and reporting of the impact of early support in improving outcomes for children.

Findings

- Decision-making following contacts, including those out of hours, is appropriate and results in the timely progression of referrals for statutory services. The threshold between early support and statutory services is consistently applied by experienced senior social workers, who exercise tight management oversight. This ensures that children and families receive the right help at the right time.
- Children at risk of significant harm are recognised and responded to appropriately, and cases progress to section 47 enquiries without delay. Although strategy discussions are held promptly, the local authority recognises that key partners are not always invited to participate and are unable to contribute to decision-making and planning. This leads to uncoordinated action in a small number of cases and means that children may unnecessarily have to tell their story twice.
- Most assessments are of a good quality. Children's experiences and wishes for the future are well captured and inform decision-making and planning. Direct work, including the use of resources and toys, is used by some social workers to engage children and helps them to be comfortable enough to share their feelings and experiences. Social workers comprehensively explore and analyse risks, and some use research findings to inform their analysis. They describe the changes that

parents are required to make. Recording is detailed and complete, which means that the reader can easily and quickly understand the child's circumstances.

- Children at risk of, or those experiencing, violence and exploitation receive a timely, holistic and well-coordinated response from a range of experienced and knowledgeable practitioners. Contemporaneous information and intelligence is available to the daily multi-agency violence, vulnerability and exploitation forum, which ensures that the partnership is well placed to progress enforcement, safeguarding and targeted intervention for children quickly. Joint work with a particular national embassy is highly effective in addressing the risks of trafficking and exploitation experienced by children from one of the borough's ethnic groups. For this reason, risks to children reduce, and they receive help and encouragement to change and improve their circumstances.
- A series of focused daily MASH meetings includes relevant partners and facilitates timely and effective information-sharing. This leads to effective risk analysis and appropriate decision-making. This is facilitated by the co-location of a wide range of partner agencies in the MASH, as well as specialists, including the female genital mutilation specialist, whose work is increasingly effective.
- The role of an education practitioner in the MASH is a strength. This experienced former senior teacher is highly effective in building the relationship between the MASH and schools and colleges. This enhances the safeguarding offer. Schools highly value the single point of contact with an educational professional who understands schools' contexts and provides appropriate support, reassurance and training. Schools are confident in sharing concerns and identifying children in need at the earliest opportunity.
- Early support referrals are proportionate to children's needs, and there is a wide range of access to early support through community hubs. These provide a broad range of scheduled youth activity and evidence-based parenting programmes. The hubs also signpost to specialist services and provide individual mentoring and outreach work. Children value and are safeguarded by being able to access both drop-in and scheduled activity at a youth hub which is in a location of concern. Parents report experiencing a positive difference after learning strategies at the many groups on offer. Individual and group work to increase children's resilience and reduce vulnerability to bullying and exploitation is reaching more children through a schools' programme. Children enjoy and make progress as they take part in this programme.
- A goal of the early support model is to develop self-sustaining communities. Early support staff identified that families from an ethnic minority community had started to disengage. Families said that the language barrier was making it difficult to understand and participate meaningfully in the groups being attended. They said they felt isolated and excluded. Early support practitioners have

responded creatively by working with community leaders to develop a bespoke parenting group initially led with early support practitioners, but this will then continue to be led by the community itself.

- In all cases seen by inspectors, decisions to 'step down' to early support were appropriate, with clear next steps identified for ongoing support. Cases are stepped up where safeguarding concerns are identified by experienced early support practitioners who are confident in recognising risks. Cases that are stepped up receive a robust evaluation in the daily MASH meeting.
- Current recording systems make it difficult to easily identify the number of families being worked with and the wider impact of help and support being offered. It is also difficult to understand the rate of cases being stepped down. The local authority knows this and is developing recording and reporting systems to resolve the issue.
- Social workers like working in Harrow and staff morale is good. Social workers report that they are well supported by accessible and experienced managers and have manageable caseloads. They access relevant training and provided examples of where they had used what they had learned with children and seen the benefit and impact immediately. The local authority designated officer arrangement is a strength. It provides clear expertise, regular case supervision, and reflective challenge.
- Innovative recruitment of social workers from abroad is helping families from the same ethnic population to engage more meaningfully. The shared language and cultural understanding breaks down barriers and builds trust with families so that children benefit from the help being offered.
- A wide range of performance data is used effectively to monitor and scrutinise front door workflows, including timeliness of decision-making, assessments and staff workloads. The quality assurance framework is comprehensive and ambitious, and this shows a corporate commitment by senior leaders and managers to auditing as a means of improving practice. However, audits seen by inspectors did not sufficiently consider the lived experience of children or the impact of the work undertaken.

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

Kate Malleson

Her Majesty's Inspector