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Pauline Maddison  
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Dear Pauline

### **Focused visit to the Royal Borough of Kingston-upon-Thames local authority children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to the Royal Borough of Kingston-upon-Thames local authority children's services on 19 and 20 March 2019. The inspectors were Kate Malleson, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Andy Whippey, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for protecting vulnerable adolescents. Specifically, inspectors considered the early identification of risk and the quality and effectiveness of the response throughout children's services. They also evaluated the quality of work to reduce identified risk and to establish whether interventions had improved children's and young people's circumstances.

Inspectors reviewed a range of evidence, including children's case records, and had case discussions with social workers. They also looked at the effectiveness of the local authority's oversight of this area of work and quality assurance information.

### **Overview**

Most vulnerable adolescents in Kingston-upon-Thames receive a good service from skilled and enthusiastic social workers. Social workers and other professionals have a comprehensive understanding of the range of risks that young people encounter from outside the family, and take appropriate action to reduce those risks. Links between children and young people's experiences of neglect and domestic abuse within the family and the increased vulnerability to exploitation are well understood. Responses are appropriately prioritised, and children and young people benefit from specialist, accessible and well-resourced help and protection. Inspectors found that a few children had been living in neglectful or abusive circumstances for too long,

despite social work intervention, and a small number of children had been out of statutory education for some time. These factors had increased their vulnerability to exploitation and, in some cases, their challenging behaviours had become more entrenched. More recently, these children have received effective help, although some are still not in receipt of full-time education.

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

- Coordination and review of risk minimisation planning and the actions required.
- Education arrangements for adolescents who are not in receipt of full-time education, to reduce their vulnerability to exploitation.
- The quality of audits, to better consider the impact of intervention on improving outcomes for young people and which lead to more specific child-focused actions.

### **Findings**

- Vulnerable adolescents are protected effectively at the 'front door'. Decision-making following contacts, including those contacts received out-of-hours, is appropriate and results in young people receiving timely intervention. Thresholds are appropriate and they are applied consistently. Immediate risk of significant harm is identified clearly, and responses are prompt and well coordinated.
- The response to young people who go missing is timely and proportionate. The 'missing panel' maintains robust oversight of these young people and carefully tracks the frequency, pattern and reason for missing episodes, and where young people are found. This information enhances planning to safeguard young people. Strategy meetings are held appropriately to evaluate risk and to plan a multi-agency response. Most meetings are thorough, with a good analysis of risk, leading to effective action to safeguard young people. Consideration of safety goals contributes to clear analysis and sound decision-making. In a small number of strategy discussions, there is a lack of clarity about the actions to be taken and the timescales for completion.
- The take-up of return home interviews is high. Young people benefit from a consistent approach from a small team of skilled workers, who undertake return home interviews with children who have been missing from home and care, including those placed out-of-authority. Return home interviews are offered within 72 hours, and workers are tenacious in their efforts to engage young people and understand the reasons why they have been missing. Risks relating to young people are well understood and articulated by workers who know them well. However, the analysis of this information to help inform future risk minimisation planning is limited.

- The multi-agency risk, vulnerability and exploitation (MARVE) panel, which has recently been expanded and reconfigured, has strong partnership commitment and is enabling comprehensive information-sharing. The broader focus of the panel to include criminal exploitation has increased scrutiny and raised awareness about the full range of contextual safeguarding risks facing individual young people in Kingston-upon-Thames. Senior managers acknowledge that it is too early to evidence impact in terms of reduction of risk and that referral pathways have yet to be fully embedded.
- A useful MARVE checklist helps social workers to identify the risk of exploitation and includes reliable indicators of the potential for exploitation and harm. The checklist forms the basis of a risk assessment and referral to the panel. However, the completed checklist is not updated or reviewed unless there is a significant change in circumstances. This is not enough to trigger an effective or timely response in cases where there have been a series of unrelated events which increase risk, or when risks are not reducing.
- Risks of exploitation or vulnerability to exploitation are identified well by social workers, and inspectors saw good use of the social work model to articulate concerns and protective factors. Safety plans, a few of which were particularly creative, are appropriately used with young people and their carers to demonstrate what needs to happen to keep young people safe. Inspectors did not find any cases of unassessed risk. However, formal risk assessments are not routinely or consistently used to analyse risks or to develop specific actions to minimise those risks. There is also a lack of clear contingency planning to respond to situations when safety plans are not being adhered to or are ineffective. The absence of a discrete risk assessment and risk minimisation plan means that young people may not receive the most effective or timely response.
- The youth resilience service provides a comprehensive and accessible service to vulnerable adolescents. Therapeutic and clinical in-house support enables young people to have access to a range of provision designed to reduce the emotional impact of exploitation. Energetic and tenacious social workers and other professionals build trusting relationships with young people, and this enables young people to talk about their experiences and to be well understood. A wide range of multi-agency partners and resources enable young people and their families to have comprehensive, timely and relevant wrap-around support. A strengthened focus on preventing adolescent homelessness has increased the numbers of young people choosing to be looked after, and enables them to receive appropriate help and support until they can safely return home or live independently.
- Education arrangements are insufficient for some vulnerable adolescents who are not accessing mainstream education. A small number of young people have been

out of education for too long and are only accessing a very small amount of tuition in the community or at home. In addition to the negative impact on education and employment outcomes, the lack of structure and purpose in the young people's days means that they are more vulnerable to negative or harmful influences.

- Social workers know their young people well and work is very clearly child-focused. Young people benefit from these positive relationships and value the care and understanding demonstrated by persistent efforts to engage with them. If young people express a preference to work with another professional, their wishes are taken into account. Social workers are imaginative and creative when working with young people, and use a variety of communication methods, such as emojis, to help young people to explore and articulate their feelings and emotions. Direct work with vulnerable adolescents is a strength.
- Young people in care are encouraged by their independent reviewing officer (IRO) to take part in their reviews. IROs write full and clear minutes to young people following their reviews, which helps young people to feel included and to understand what is happening. IRO decisions and actions are copied into supervision notes, enabling better-coordinated planning for young people. However, case records contain limited evidence of whether IROs monitor the progress of young people's care plans between reviews to ensure the completion of agreed actions.
- While there is a strong focus on the use of general and themed audits to improve practice, audits are more focused on compliance than the impact of intervention on outcomes. Audits lack specific recommendations to improve the effectiveness and quality of work with children and to sufficiently enable learning to be replicated and embedded more widely. Senior managers redesigned the auditing template during the visit, in response to feedback from inspectors, and have plans to include feedback from children and young people, parents and carers about their experiences of the quality of services provided.
- Supervision of social workers is regular and there is some evidence of reflection during supervision sessions. However, discussions do not consistently result in clear and specific actions to improve young people's circumstances. Caseloads are manageable and staff are able to visit young people more frequently than statutory requirements if necessary. Staff morale is high and all staff report visible, supportive management. There is access to relevant training, as evidenced by the widespread awareness of the workforce of emerging local concerns in relation to county lines and organised crime.

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

Yours sincerely

Kate Malleon  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**