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Dear Jacquie

Focused visit to Hackney children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Hackney children's services on 21 and 22 September 2022. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Christine Kennet and Nicki Shaw.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for 'front door' services, including decision-making and thresholds for referrals about children, child protection enquiries, decisions to step up or down from early help, and emergency action out of hours.

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

Headline findings

Children in need of help and protection in Hackney benefit from strong front door services that help to ensure they receive the right support at the right time. The recent integration of early help (EH) workers into the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) is improving screening of contact and referrals, to ensure children and families are directed promptly to the appropriate service. Most children receive proportionate responses that meet their needs. Action for children at immediate risk is timely and effective.

Senior leaders are driving necessary changes to improve practice at a pace that suits the workforce and allows for the ongoing delivery of safe services. Committed and skilled staff feel supported through the implementation of a new practice framework, with a focus on an anti-racist, trauma-informed and systemic approach to practice. They feel listened to, valued and supported. Senior leaders know their services well and are making improvements in a challenging context. As leaders recognise, caseloads in the access and assessment (A&A) teams, and for some newly qualified workers, are too high and recording of supervision is inconsistent. Leaders have

sustained significant financial investment in youth services to address the risk of serious youth violence.

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

- Social work caseloads in the child assessment service.
- The timeliness of practice, particularly assessments.
- The recording of regular, reflective supervision.

Main findings

Children in need of help, support and protection benefit from a range of social care and EH services in Hackney. Initial contacts and referrals are screened effectively by an experienced team of co-located social care and EH professionals. Information-sharing and proportionate risk assessments ensure that children receive the right level of support.

Improvements to the EH offer for children and families have simplified access to services, with skilled practitioners supporting families who have a wide range of needs. Targeted and universal support is available via a single 'request for support form', including for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities. The 'Hackney supporting families programme' provides timely assessments and support through children's centres and council family support teams. Working through youth hubs, adventure playgrounds and sports hubs, 'Young Hackney' targeted youth support service helps to divert, disrupt and prevent young people's involvement in gangs, exploitation and serious youth violence.

Experienced EH social workers and practitioners provide child-focused assessments and targeted interventions to identify risks and meet needs. If risks escalate, qualified social workers in the EH support units can undertake child protection and child and family assessments, determining levels of risk and sometimes mitigating the need to transfer to a different worker or team. A buddy system with the child in need teams supports targeted parenting interventions and transfers between EH and statutory services as needed.

Experienced managers and practitioners in the MASH apply appropriate thresholds for statutory services. Partner agencies co-located within the MASH work together to share relevant information and ensure that children and families get the right level of help at the right time. Multi-agency decision-making is informed by previous history, and children's cases are RAG-rated appropriately for further screening. Parental consent is routinely requested, or if risks to children are deemed high, overridden when necessary. Management oversight is a strength, with the rationale for decisions and next steps recorded clearly by experienced social work managers.

MASH contacts and referrals are further informed by specialist teams such as the 'No recourse to public funds and private fostering' team. Experienced practitioners who understand these specialist areas raise awareness and share experience through the

MASH, A&A teams and wider professional network. This has led to more children in these circumstances being identified and supported. A professional consultation line operated by MASH social work staff provides helpful guidance for professionals on risk assessment, appropriate referrals and consent requirements.

Children in need of immediate help and protection are identified promptly by experienced social work practitioners and managers. Well-attended multi-agency strategy discussions take place the same day in the A&A teams. These meetings ensure actions are promptly agreed to safeguard children, and plans made for ongoing assessment and investigation. Actions and next steps from strategy discussions are appropriate and well recorded. Prompt legal planning and court applications support the safety of children when these steps are required. Daily multi-agency risk meetings within the MASH support risk assessment and decision-making in complex cases.

Workforce challenges have increased workloads and caused some delays. However, most children's assessments in the A&A service are comprehensive, child-focused and analytical. Children's experiences, safety and welfare are key components in these assessments, and social workers' analysis is mostly clear. Purposeful work by experienced professionals ensures that assessments are informed by the experience of children, young people and parents. This supports effective decision-making about ongoing social work intervention or referrals to EH services. Children's identity and language needs are understood and supported well. In most assessments, children's experiences and parental vulnerabilities are clearly considered. Some assessments of children in need, particularly where social workers are less experienced, are not completed quickly enough, so that some children and families wait too long for identified work to begin.

Management oversight is clearly recorded at key decision-making points, such as allocations and at the end of assessments, providing direction and setting out next steps. Staff spoken to clearly articulated that they feel supported by their managers, who are available and responsive. Although staff receive supervision, reflective thinking and planning are not evident in children's case records. Staff morale is mainly good, with some agency staff taking up permanent posts.

Caseloads in the A&A teams and for some newly qualified workers are too high. Some workers feel their workloads do not enable them to carry out effective assessments, or that backlogs of cases at transfer points make it difficult for them to attend training. Despite these delays, no children were found to be left without help and support. Senior leaders are aware of the pressures in A&A and have wider plans to manage work more effectively in this part of the service.

Children's plans focus on their needs and respond to risks identified through their assessments. Some actions within plans do not have completion dates, and there is limited follow-up in supervision records to demonstrate the impact of earlier planning prior to transfer between teams. Drift and delay affect some children, although no significant impact was seen.

Hackney has implemented a comprehensive quality assurance framework, with an array of audit activity over the last six months. Audits are targeted and feedback is influencing practice, supporting learning and helping to improve outcomes for children. Arrangements are in place to monitor progress on actions for audited cases to differing timescales, depending on their judgement outcome. Senior leaders continue to develop their quality assurance framework and have wider plans to embed in practice and strengthen moderation.

An emergency duty team of experienced practitioners and managers provides a responsive service overnight and at weekends. Coordinated information from the placements team and a fostering manager on call supports a cohesive approach to potential emergency placements out of hours. Effective communication is in place between out-of-hours workers and the front door services and teams.

Leaders have introduced a dedicated workforce and practice development senior social work role to build and oversee their assessed and supported first year in employment. The offer to newly qualified social workers is comprehensive and provides them with opportunities to learn and develop through a range of workforce development activities and support from a practice educator. This work supports the recruitment and retention of social workers.

The strategic leadership team is embedding changes to the new practice model and other areas of work. Implementation has occurred within a difficult context. A major cyber attack in 2020 created significant challenges for the council. Senior leaders have implemented a new recording system for children's services. They know their services well and they have a clear agenda for further change and progression. They understand that the pace of change must be balanced and they must have credible plans to continue improving services. Staff reference groups are established and provide opportunities for staff to have their say and give feedback to senior leaders on the challenges and barriers in practice.

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

Yours sincerely

Christine Kennet
His Majesty's Inspector