

25 May 2018

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Dear Debbie

Monitoring visit to Tower Hamlets children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to the London Borough of Tower Hamlets children's services on 1 and 2 May 2018. This was the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate for overall effectiveness in April 2017. The inspectors were Brenda McLaughlin, HMI, Kate Malleon, HMI, and Tom Anthony, a seconded inspector.

Inspectors evaluated the local authority's arrangements for the help and protection of vulnerable adolescents. In particular, they focused on whether the considerable failures, identified in the 2017 inspection, to help and protect children at risk of exploitation and those missing from home or care, are now being addressed.

A range of evidence was considered during the visit, including discussions with social workers and their managers. Inspectors looked in detail at children's cases and met with committed staff across agencies, who are resolute in their efforts to engage with and protect these highly vulnerable children. They reviewed the quality of practice provided by the out-of-hours emergency duty team (EDT) as well as the quality of practice provided to children at risk of being radicalised. Inspectors spoke to the chair of the safeguarding children's board and explored with senior leaders how the reconfiguration of targeted and early help services could identify and prevent the exploitation of vulnerable children sooner. Additionally, inspectors looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and the effectiveness of audit activity.

Overview

A major challenge for Tower Hamlets is the alarming increase in violent knife crime (13 knife-related incidents in the past six weeks) linked to drug-related gang activity, and involving young and vulnerable boys and girls. These are often sexually and criminally exploited children, those missing from home and care and young people associated with gangs. They are mainly children with very complex needs who are known to a number of agencies, sometimes for many years, due to adversity suffered in childhood. Too many are not accessing education or training.

Previously, the local authority's relationships with key safeguarding partners were underdeveloped, with too many staff working in isolation. Senior leaders across all agencies have recognised that the complexity of issues in relation to exploited children means that a joint multi-agency approach is required. Consequently, the revised early help strategy is intended to address former weak practice for this group of children. This is now an important priority for the local authority and the safeguarding children's board. Working relationships with stakeholders are developing to help and protect these vulnerable children. This is beginning to have a positive impact, leading to more effective and innovative practice. Children's services are actively seeking to do more to help and support schools.

Since the previous inspection and the monitoring visit in December 2017, there has been a substantial improvement in the quality of practice with this group of exploited children and their families. The recent co-location of key staff and the creation of a dedicated, authoritative, multi-agency exploitation team is very effective in responding quickly to high-risk situations. A renewed focus on children as victims of exploitation rather than the criminalising of their behaviour is leading to an enhanced understanding of their circumstances and analysis of risk. Social workers now have a better understanding of children's lived experience. Together with partner agencies, they are increasingly diligent in their attempts to work with and support these young people and their brothers and sisters.

Reliable and effective intelligence gathering processes have been developed to support the sharing of information on a daily basis. This has led to perpetrator disruption activities, as well as prompt actions to prevent serious youth violence and other gang-related activities escalating.

Overall, while social work practice remains variable across all teams, increasingly, vulnerable adolescents receive higher levels of support and intervention. This is a discernible difference to the previous poor practice and indicates a noteworthy change in culture in frontline social work, which is encouraging.

Findings

Tower Hamlets multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) promptly identifies risk to exploited children. Decisions on thresholds for services are made by suitably qualified and experienced social workers and managers and are considered at the daily MASH meeting. Most gang-affiliated young people, victims and perpetrators of serious violence, those at risk of sexual and criminal exploitation and children missing from home or care benefit from an effective multi-agency response. For example, young people arrested for perpetrating knife crime are considered as high risk due to the possible retaliation by other gangs. They are appropriately allocated to social workers, who carry out a safeguarding assessment of the young person and also the potential risk to family members. This would not have happened before.

The exploitation team has an increased awareness of the multiple and overlapping risks to all children. Although very recently established (March 2018), these alternative methods of multi-agency interventions and engagement with young people are having a positive impact. The team has a good understanding of the Tower Hamlets gang's profile. Effective multi-agency mapping meetings assist professionals to identify, track and understand common associations across gang memberships, including drug misuse, radicalisation, serious youth violence, child sexual exploitation and children who going missing. Emerging information and intelligence is continually and quickly evaluated, leading to effective action to disrupt perpetrators and defuse emerging incidents in collaboration with the community safety rapid response team.

The monitoring visit in December 2017 identified an inconsistent and confused response to assessing risk to children missing from home and care. Since then, urgent action has been taken by the newly appointed missing coordinator. This has had a significant and positive impact on the quality of practice for children who go missing. Arrangements for the completion of return home interviews (RHIs) have been streamlined and are effective. Data shows that the service has improved the timeliness of interventions. Inspectors found that the quality of RHIs has improved. A specifically trained group of professionals from the MASH, EDT and the early help service regularly visit children to conduct the interview. There is a strong emphasis on getting alongside young people at the earliest opportunity. The development of a weekend RHI service carried out by the same practitioners is helping children to develop purposeful relationships with professionals and avoids them having to repeat their story.

Multi-agency child protection strategy meetings are now being convened appropriately in response to risks to exploited and missing children. Although local authority audits and inspectors found that the outcome of strategy meeting decisions and actions are not routinely recorded, it is evident that there has been improved attendance by other agencies. This is effective in sharing information about risk and concerns. The majority of children at risk of sexual and criminal exploitation or who have a missing episode are entered onto the local authority electronic system. This assists managers in identifying and tracking children with multiple vulnerabilities. A comprehensive dataset is reviewed by the divisional director and this information is shared with the LSCB 'vulnerable children exploitation group'. Child exploitation screening tools are used effectively to recognise risk. This informs the undertaking of timely risk assessments and the development of coherent safety plans. The most serious concerns for children's safety are now escalated for regular senior management review and direction.

Strong partnership work to counter the risk to children from radicalisation is having a positive impact. The changing nature of potential threats in this highly complex and sensitive area continues to be well understood. Work to reduce risk is suitably targeted through strong, effective intelligence-sharing with relevant partner agencies. A peer review of the Tower Hamlets 'Prevent' programme took place in March 2018, which was positive. However, the review found that there is a challenge in respect to the local population perception of the 'Prevent' agenda. It is a priority action within the wider council to address this. The review also recommends that the local authority supports the learning and development of elected members so that they further develop their leadership role in this area. Inspectors found that the preventing violent extremism dedicated team, which is led by an experienced and knowledgeable manager, ensures assessments for children at risk of radicalisation receive a proportionate and timely response.

The reconfigured child-focused out-of-hours emergency duty team (EDT) is led by a committed and innovative manager and is delivering a much improved quality service to vulnerable adolescents. The team is well resourced and its work is increasingly effective. It provides a well-coordinated and timely response when children go missing. The communication between out-of-hours and day services is effective, with the EDT 'footprint' visible on children's records. This contributes to a more complete picture about the frequency, nature and level of risk that children experience. Improved communication with the police is enhancing joint working. Wider engagement with accident and emergency health partners helpfully identified an information-sharing gap, which both parties have addressed. Management oversight of the EDT team is strong and challenging, but also aspirational and supportive. The

service is outward facing and engaged in pan-London learning and development forums. Although changes need to become embedded, children at risk of harm out of hours are starting to become safer.

The recruitment and retention of staff is a priority and challenge for Tower Hamlets. The local authority is successfully recruiting permanently to senior and middle manager posts. However, the service currently relies on high numbers of agency staff, particularly in assessment and intervention teams, although there is some success with agency workers transitioning into permanent posts. Managers are promoting the 'growing your own' recruitment of social workers, with a comprehensive training and support package for newly qualified workers that is intended to attract additional permanent staff.

In summary

The evidence gathered during this visit has identified substantial, but very recent, improvements to the quality of multi-agency and social work practice for vulnerable adolescents and their families. This is extremely encouraging given the particularly complex challenges involved in this work. Political leaders and managers are demonstrating considerable determination and commitment to embedding and sustaining these changes, while simultaneously addressing the areas of poor practice.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Brenda McLaughlin
Her Majesty's Inspector