

8 December 2016

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Dear Ms Hudson

### **Monitoring visit to Lambeth children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Lambeth children's services on 8 and 9 November 2016. This was the fifth visit by Ofsted since the local authority was judged inadequate for overall effectiveness in February 2015. The inspectors were Brenda McLaughlin HMI and Louise Hocking HMI.

On previous visits, inspectors had identified continuing serious and widespread failings in the quality of services to children and families. However, following the monitoring visit in July 2016, the local authority has worked at a pace, led by the interim director of children's services, to improve the senior management oversight of frontline practice. This has made a discernible difference to the quality of work in many of the cases seen during this visit.

### **Areas covered during the visit**

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the areas of help and protection, with a particular focus on:

- management oversight and quality of supervision
- the quality of social work practice in the 'long term' family support and child protection (FSCP) teams
- the quality of assessments and plans for children in need of help and protection
- arrangements to step cases down from child protection to child in need.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, supervision records, performance data, audits and progress reports. They met with social workers and their line managers. They spoke to child protection case conference chairs and their manager, the interim assistant director and the service manager, and representatives from the quality assurance audit team.

## **Summary of findings**

- Supervision is now frequent for the majority of social workers, with effective support and guidance available from advanced practitioners. In addition, staff have the opportunity to participate in fortnightly reflective group supervision, enhancing their knowledge and confidence in understanding and assessing risks to children and their families.
- Weekly performance meetings and monthly practice clinics and performance clinics, led by senior staff, are bringing effective challenge to practice. As a result, an increasing number of children are being helped and protected.
- Inspectors saw improvement in the quality of case recording in most of the child protection and children in need cases sampled. Helpful case summaries, supported by an appropriate use of the signs of safety model, are effective in evidencing and analysing risks. However, the quality of direct work with children and families is too variable, and is compromised by too many changes of social workers and managers. The voice of the child is not consistently heard or evident in assessments, or influential in shaping effective plans. Children do not have routine access to an independent advocate to support them through the child protection process. Engagement and direct communication with fathers were absent in most cases seen by inspectors. This included where they were the main risk to children and also where they were known to be the key protective factor.
- Help for children in need is provided in line with the agreed plan. Plans are beginning to reflect the assessments completed, but although they include some specific objectives, they are not clear enough with regard to intended outcomes and timescales. They do not explicitly identify what progress needs to be made.
- In cases examined by inspectors, appropriate decisions were made at review child protection conferences about whether a plan should continue or 'step down' to a child in need plan.

## Evaluation of progress

Senior managers accept that substantial work is still required to ensure that services for children in Lambeth are of a sufficient standard to ensure that outcomes for children are consistently good. Managers have focused their attention appropriately on embedding basic practice standards, ensuring that:

- vulnerable children are visited and seen alone by their worker
- social workers are supported by managers to do their job effectively
- managers at all levels in the organisation take responsibility for using the improved performance and quality assurance systems, to ensure that children are helped and protected from harm.

Although they began only very recently, a range of routine, bespoke and closely scrutinised auditing activities are helping to change the culture, holding staff to account for improving outcomes for children and their families. More work is required to ensure that this process directly involves frontline staff and that targeted action following audit is timely and effective in implementing the required changes for the child. Increased scrutiny and an 'alert' system instigated by case conference chairs are being embedded and are intended to provide additional safeguards to prevent work drifting between case conferences.

Children in need of protection are given priority by managers. The very large majority of initial child protection conferences are held within 15 working days of the strategy discussion, as expected by statutory guidance. However, records indicate that performance in visiting children subject to child protection plans has slipped from 95% in September 2015 to 84% this year. Senior managers are monitoring this and reviewing the quality of the data.

Child protection core groups and child in need review meetings are not consistently held in line with timescales expected by statutory guidance. In better cases, the meetings involved parents and relevant professionals, including, where appropriate, professionals from adult mental health and drug/alcohol services. Some records made of these meetings failed to provide a clear picture of progress against objectives. In some cases, this was a result of the weaknesses in the detail of child protection and child in need plans.

Responses to cases in which children go missing from home and care, and those at risk of sexual and gang exploitation, are not clearly defined. The local authority acknowledges that records do not contain sufficient detailed analysis of the likelihood of further episodes or actions to mitigate risks. There are active plans in place to address these deficits in collaboration with partner agencies, and the Local Safeguarding Children Board. The recent appointment of a 'missing coordinator' and

improved management capacity are expected to improve practice. Inspectors will evaluate progress for these children during the next monitoring visit.

The pace of change has improved since the last visit. Prior to this, it was too slow. Leaders and managers have a better understanding of their strengths and weaknesses and this is helping to inform decisions to support continuous improvement.

However, sustained improvement in Lambeth is being hampered by the frequent turnover of staff. In the FSCP service, only 19 out of 85 staff are permanent. While many of these locum workers are very competent, children experience too many changes in worker, leading to high variability in the quality of the services they receive. The impact of this was evident in a small number of cases where practice was weak. There were delays in children being seen, drift in progressing work, poor planning and failures to recognise risk.

Senior managers are actively committed to recruiting permanent staff and to creating a stable and positive environment for social work to flourish. There is some evidence of increased stability, as eight permanent service managers have now been appointed, and the director of services is permanent. Social workers told inspectors that caseloads are manageable.

Managers recognise that, while they are beginning to embed some of the basic components of better practice, there is still 'much fragility in the system'. Ensuring that practice is consistently good is a major challenge, compounded by high turnover of frontline managers and social workers.

Overall, this visit found progress, from a very low base, in most of these areas. Senior managers within children's services have responded determinedly to tackle the issues identified in previous monitoring visits. A recently completed self-assessment shows that they have a sound understanding of the key priorities for improvement and recognise the immense challenges they face. Leaders are highly visible and accessible, inspiring increased confidence within the workforce. It is vital that these early signs of progress are secured and sustained and that the pace of change accelerates across all service areas.

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

Yours sincerely

Brenda McLaughlin HMI

**Her Majesty's Inspector**

The letter will be copied to the Department for Education at:  
SocialCare.INSPECTION-IMPROVEMENT@education.gsi.gov.uk