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Dear Pinaki

Focused visit to the London Borough of Lewisham's children's services

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic.

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Lewisham children's services on 21 and 22 July 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Tara Geere and Kendra Bell. Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in care.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. However, the delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. The lead inspector and the director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19. Inspectors were on site for the entire visit and used video calls for some discussions with local authority staff, managers, leaders and partner agencies.

Headline findings

Since the previous inspection of 2019, and despite the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Lewisham, the senior leadership team has improved and strengthened services for children in care. Leaders know the service well. They have a clear understanding of areas for development that are being appropriately addressed. The appointment of an experienced director of children's services is supporting these improvements. Leaders recognise that more work is required to further embed good practice. This includes the consistent use of the social work

practice model, to ensure that children in care are able to live in homes that meet their individual needs and have a positive impact on their lives.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The quality of children's plans, pathway plans and review letters to children, to include child-friendly language.
- Placement sufficiency, to ensure the range and choice of suitable homes for children.
- Consultation and notification to host authorities of children placed at a distance.
- Case recording of visits, supervision and rationale for decision-making and the matching of placements.
- The timeliness of initial health assessments and personal education plan meetings.

Main findings

Senior leaders and partner agencies have worked well together to deliver an effective response to mitigate the impact of the pandemic in Lewisham. The local community has been significantly affected by the pandemic. Tragically, there have been over 600 deaths, which includes a number of Lewisham council staff. There has been a significant increase in the use of food banks and adults claiming out-of-work benefits. Despite the ongoing pressures this has put on services, leaders have continued to prioritise improvements to children's services, underpinned by corporate and political support.

When children cannot live with their families, authoritative action is taken to protect and safeguard them. There is robust use of the Public Law Outline. This finding was triangulated during this visit from conversations with the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) and the judiciary.

The majority of children live in homes that meet their individual needs. Children who spoke to inspectors during the visit said that they feel valued by their carers and are being well supported. Leaders have rightly identified that placement sufficiency is an area for improvement. A small number of children have had to move home too many times. The executive director for children and young people is personally leading the work on addressing these issues, including reviewing the sufficiency strategy and chairing the placement review panel. A new assistant director post has been created to enable more leadership capacity. This post will provide oversight of quality assurance and commissioning to increase the range of placements available, including the number of in-house fostering placements.

The rationale for placement matching and for decisions to move children into unregulated provision is understood by staff and managers, although this is not consistently recorded on children's records. When bespoke arrangements are put in place to support children, or court delays have had an impact on children moving to

permanent arrangements, management oversight and planning have increased. This has supported children in these arrangements more effectively. The local authority is working with providers and Ofsted to register unregistered provision that has been sourced for children.

Leaders have recently strengthened notifications to host authorities where children are placed at a distance. When children move to live outside the borough, placements are not routinely informed by consultations with host authorities. This can have an impact on the timeliness of children receiving services to meet their needs, such as child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). Further work is required to ensure that notification letters explain how the placement will meet the child's needs, with up-to-date details on health, CAMHS and education.

Leaders have made improvements to care planning for children in care. There is still further work to do, to ensure that the language used in plans and review letters is child friendly and that actions are specific and time bound.

Social workers know their children well. They are passionate advocates for them. Workers use a range of techniques and communication methods to support children to voice their wishes and feelings. This was clearly demonstrated in the children with disabilities team. Children are regularly visited. During the pandemic, workers used a combination of video, telephone calls and virtual meetings to maintain contact with children and engage with them, although written records do not always do justice to the purposeful work that is undertaken. When required, there is appropriate use of translators to support children's engagement in planning and to safeguard them when spending time with their families.

An increasing number of children benefit from advocacy to help them to share their views and opinions in a range of meetings. This is supported by independent reviewing officers (IROs) meeting with children before their reviews to ascertain their views. IROs provide effective oversight of children's planning at timely reviews. Minutes of reviews are now written to children in the form of letters, although they do not consistently use child-friendly language.

Leaders have strengthened corporate parenting arrangements since the last inspection. Children have co-produced the children in care charter and regularly attend corporate parenting board meetings.

Senior leaders demonstrate a clear focus on hearing the voices of children to develop and improve services. The children in care council has continued to meet virtually throughout the pandemic. The children have participated in a range of activities, consultations and celebration events, with senior leaders attending some meetings to hear their views at first hand.

Lewisham has supported the accommodation of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children from other local authorities under transfer arrangements. These children

benefit from the work of knowledgeable workers to ensure that their individual needs are assessed and responded to effectively.

When children go missing, they are offered return home interviews, although these are not consistently timely. Not all children take up the offer; this can limit professionals' understanding of the push and pull factors for these children and inhibit the effectiveness of safety planning.

Despite the difficulties caused by the pandemic, review health assessments have continued to focus on improving the physical and emotional health outcomes of children in care. Some children experience delays in initial health assessments caused by consent issues. Children are supported by a wide range of agencies to address their individual health needs including CAMHS, drug and alcohol services and specialist provision for disabled children.

Leaders of the virtual school acted swiftly at the start of the pandemic to work with other school leaders to keep vulnerable pupils safe. School attendance for children in care has been closely monitored and has not been adversely affected by the pandemic. The virtual school service has further supported children's education attainment through the use of additional tuition and distribution of laptops. However, not all children benefit from the targeted support offered by regular oversight of personal education planning.

Senior leaders are focused on improving the stability of the workforce. The proportion of permanent social workers and managers has increased in the last year. Staff talk positively about their manageable caseloads, regular supervision, team meetings and access to a range of training, including the social work model of practice. However, supervision recording is not consistently evidencing the reflective conversations and actions are not always specific or time bound. Staff morale is high. Workers report feeling supported by visible and approachable managers and senior leaders through the challenges of the pandemic and the good support they received with home-working arrangements.

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

Yours sincerely

Tara Geere
Her Majesty's Inspector