

<b>Item No.</b> 7.	<b>Classification:</b> Open	<b>Date:</b> 4 November 2020	<b>Meeting Name:</b> Corporate Parenting Committee
<b>Report title:</b>		Feedback from Inspections of Children’s Social Care and Youth Offending Services	
<b>Ward(s) or groups affected:</b>		All	
<b>From:</b>		Alasdair Smith, Director of Children & Families	

## **PURPOSE**

To advise the Corporate Parenting Committee of the outcome of two inspection processes undertaken within the Children and Families Division during the response to the Covid 19 pandemic.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. To note the contents of this report

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Children’s Social Care and Early Help**

2. Her Majesty’s Inspector of Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) conducted an inspection, called a “focused visit”, of the council’s children’s social care and early help services, located within the council’s Children and Families Division. The purpose of the focused visit was to consider how the council had provided services for children and families in its social care system during the Covid 19 pandemic.
3. Southwark was one of three councils chosen to be the first to be inspected following the cessation of inspection for 6 months due to the pandemic. This was not a graded inspection.
4. The focused visit was undertaken by 5 inspectors using virtual methods over 4 days from 29 September 2020 to 1 October 2020. The inspection consisted of focus groups of managers and multi-agency partners on key areas, consideration in depth of 20 children including interviews with social workers, carers and schools, and dip sampling of a wide selection of other work across the whole range of children’s social care services.
5. On 2 October, the inspection team provided feedback about their findings. This

report is based on what was shared in that meeting as well as meetings with senior leaders undertaken during the inspection. A letter of findings will be published on 13 November 2020.

## **Youth Offending Service**

6. Southwark was one of seven Youth Offending Services chosen for a thematic review of youth offending work under Covid-19 restrictions by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation. This inspection consisted of focus groups with managers, board members and staff groups; and reviews of 10 cases with the allocated workers. The inspection meetings started w/c 22 June 2020 and sessions with casework staff completed w/c 20 July 2020. These inspections are not a graded core inspection but rather a thematic look at practice delivery.
7. The thematic report is due to be published early November 2020. 'Hot' feedback was provided by the lead inspector in a virtual meeting on 5 August 2020 and the contents of this report are taken from that. This was a significant opportunity to hear informally from critical friends and allow us to prepare for the more robust HMIP inspection that Southwark is due.

## **KEY ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION**

### **Ofsted Focused Visit**

#### **Early Help**

8. Inspectors felt there was an impressive strategic response to helping children and families. A good application of thresholds for help and support in early help, although there was some delay for a small number of children from the point of referral to the Family Early Help Service to receipt of intervention due in large part to the demands experienced during the pandemic.
9. Inspectors felt that intervention through Children's Centres represented a timely offer of support. They acknowledged the work of all agencies providing a safety net for families considering the most vulnerable children. Inspectors valued the thinking ahead approach.

#### **Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub**

10. The service adapted quickly to virtual working, becoming more efficient which had a positive impact on decision making for children, particularly for multi-agency involvement in this. Inspectors saw no detriment in decision making in the MASH during the pandemic period. Application of thresholds was consistent and appropriate and ensured that families were directed towards the

right help at the right time, including the interface between early help and children's social care.

11. Inspectors recognised that addressing concerns around children being in homes with significant levels of domestic violence was a national concern. They saw a robust response within the MASH, that was proportionate and that was very aware of the impact of domestic violence on children. Research and analysis was used well within the MASH and there was good involvement from specialist services, i.e. Solace. The MASH showed evidence of researched informed culturally sensitive work around domestic violence.

### **Children in need and child protection**

12. Inspectors saw evidence of the high level of complexity in children and families lives and were very impressed with the overall approach of social workers and managers. Decision making at the end of assessment is supported by detailed analysis, and decisions to move into child in need planning was proportionate and balanced, thresholds were well applied.
13. Inspectors were positive about the minimal use of virtual visiting and the work that had been done to still positively establish good relationships with children.
14. Inspectors found that for the most part plans are comprehensive, realistic and child focused but they also found that some plans are not updated when they should be and that the sometimes do not reflect the changing needs of children for example, where risk escalates or new issues occur, such as changing patterns of school attendance.
15. Inspectors asked us to ensure that plans are more purposeful and that actions are more focused on what is we are seeking to measure as progress and improvement in outcomes, and why. They had seen some very strong examples, but this could be improved across the board.
16. Inspectors noted that whilst assessments showed good understanding and analysis of risk, when this moved into longer term planning there could be delay in implementing plans. Good work is being done to understand need but in some cases, there could be more pace in taking forward activity to improve outcomes for children.
17. Inspectors recognised the incredibly tenacity shown by social workers trying to continue to engage with children and young people in creative ways during the pandemic. Inspectors were pleased to hear from social workers who confidently and positively described the efforts they had gone to engage children physically and virtually during lockdown, whilst being able to professionally describe the challenges that did and still exist.

18. In most instances, inspectors found direct work to be sensitive to children's needs and circumstances, and conducted using a range of tools to understand their wishes and feelings. There were good examples of social workers developing bespoke tools and ways of working with children, and inspectors saw that social workers knew their children well.
19. Social workers had met the challenge of meeting children and young people virtually, and inspectors were impressed with the work all staff had been doing. Inspectors noted that social workers adapted well to the demands of the pandemic and they should be proud of this. There was a good use of interpreters and work to understand people's culture and identify.
20. Inspectors identified the system for tracking children prior to court proceedings is underdeveloped and delay is not all explained by the pandemic.
21. Inspectors viewed the work with children with disabilities needs to be stronger in relation to the oversight of managing child centred practice.
22. Inspectors felt there was good multi-agency working in particular with schools and health services. Engagement of partners in virtual CIN network meetings and reviews was seen as a positive. The pandemic had been a catalyst in terms of galvanising multi-agency partners safeguard children.
23. In relation to work to support vulnerable adolescents Inspectors commented there was enthusiastic staff, who had good ideas about how to move forward our work to support young people at risk of exploitation. Workers have good knowledge of individual young people, and there is positive instances of good and regular inter-professional communication and development of the network around children. Some positive examples of holistic planning and understanding of the impact of childhood trauma. Inspectors could see the development of an early intervention approach.
24. Response to extra-familial harm was not as joined up as it could be and required work. Inspectors had heard some positive descriptions of activity but felt these needed to be captured and progressed promptly.

### **Children in care and care leavers**

25. Inspectors felt that children enter care in a timely fashion and in their best interest, and that the use of Section 20 (voluntary accommodation) is appropriate.

26. Inspectors found the majority of children have continued to make progress during the pandemic. Most live with committed carers and receive regular and purposeful care and support from their social workers.
27. Inspectors found that children's health needs were well considered. Strengths and difficulties questionnaires (SDQs) were successfully triggering access to services for children, in terms of therapeutic work, and access to a good and wide-ranging child mental health and wellbeing offer.
28. Inspectors saw a resolute approach to staying in touch with children in care during the pandemic, and in many instances children had more contact than they might usually, and inspectors were confident that relationships had been well maintained. They felt that nothing about the pandemic had affected negatively on the relationships between social workers and children in care.
29. Inspectors felt children's contact with their families had been well thought about to enable children to stay in touch with family using virtual means and face-to-face contact.
30. Inspectors felt appropriate placements are identified for children in care and all children reviewed were having their needs met by their placements including where these were not long term.
31. Inspectors told us that children's long term placements were well matched and that they were not resource led, however they repeated that sufficiency for older young people is a persistent issue. Inspectors saw acute difficulty in finding placements for adolescents with complex behaviours.
32. Inspectors felt we could provide help and support earlier to improve placement stability overall and noted positively the restarting of the complex needs panel that was stopped during the pandemic.
33. Foster carers were universally positive about the support and help they receive. They told inspectors that social workers were reliable and responsive and most of all that "they do what they say they are going to do." They also said that children were made to feel extra valued and cared for.
34. Inspectors concluded the offer to young people who have left care as highly effective and that improvements have been embedded and sustained. Personal advisors deliver with dedication and diligently support young people to achieve independence.
35. Inspectors saw positive evidence of clinical support to young people who have left care and noted the positive work of highly skilled experience practitioners.

36. Inspectors who met young people said they described feeling “care about, as well as cared for”.
37. Pathway plans represent the voice of children well and their ambitions, care leavers are helped to feel safe, and inspectors spoke positively of the letters to young people included in plans.

### **Education Support for children in care and care leavers**

38. The virtual school was seen to have responded positively to the pandemic in a number of ways. It had responded promptly to ascertain the whereabouts and attendance of our children including where those children had low attendance or were declining to attend. Children were provided promptly with laptops and support to access online learning. The virtual school put in place supplementary provision, and showed particular efforts to offer supplementary learning for KS4 pupils.
39. The development of the Covid-19 PEP was remark on positively, and inspectors saw this as a good vehicle that had been well used to keep children safe, engaged and improve attendance. Inspectors noted that 90% of children in care now have good attendance and there were particular successes for those with SEND.
40. Inspectors felt that the focus on support to young people moving into post-16 provision was having a positive impact on outcomes and the IEG Officer works well to establish their destinations and support those in need of additional help.
41. Inspectors cited the high number of pupils placed outside of the borough and reflected that they had established relationships with the virtual school and that remote contact had meant they received no different offer of support compared to those living locally.
42. In terms of the education of children during the pandemic, the inspectors were very impressed by the children’s own commitment to continuing in education and the efforts they were going to themselves to attend.
43. Inspectors also noted that placement decision making took good care to ensure that where possible children could remain in their existing education settings and support was offered to facilitate this well by services.

## **Feedback from children and young people**

44. Inspectors were very impressed with both groups of young people that they met during the inspection (care leavers and children in care).
45. They felt that our young people had shown great resilience during a time of huge disruption, and they were particularly caring of each other.
46. Young people felt really cared for and were full of praise for their workers.
47. Young people reported that advice and support was always available to them including at weekends and evenings, and that they routinely received lot of information about what help and support was available to them
48. The most significant issue raised by young people was access to housing and the help available to them to prepare for the reality of independent living. Including access to their savings.
49. Young people felt they had passionate, caring and experienced workers and would like to thank their PAs and get them a pay rise.

## **Workforce**

50. Inspectors felt that staff were skilled, able and committed social workers, who mostly have appropriate workloads that allow them sufficient time and capacity to deliver child centred practice.
51. Inspectors said that despite the complexity inherent in the Borough staff relentlessly hold hope for our children and young people, they are committed and child focused, and they take the time to do the work with children that is needed to build trust.
52. Inspectors noted that they could see the evidence of staff turnover as being part of the impact on the issues of delay in progressing plans but that leaders have a strategy to improve the workforce stability.

## **Youth Offending Service**

53. Inspectors fed back informally how positive the response of the Youth Offending Service and partners has been during the pandemic. They highlighted the strength of a culture of discussion across the organisation, effective information flow and an understanding of the increased risk to black, asian and minority ethnicity communities came across strongly.
54. Inspectors acknowledged the adaptability of staff, their creativity and flexibility, their knowledge of children's development and decision-making is impressive. The felt staff were rising to the challenge and being listened to by managers and supported by them.
55. Inspectors felt strength was the maturity and development of the systemic, trauma-informed approach and the input of the clinical practitioner important, constructive and useful – a 'stand out' approach not seen in other areas with the impact visible across the service.

## **Casework**

56. Inspectors felt C-19 risk assessments were done well and used as a live document to support practice and assessments recognised the emotional and mental health aspects of the pandemic.
57. Inspectors felt staff know their young people and respond to different needs and are active, agile and alert in their response.
58. Inspectors felt there was good multiagency working dealing with complex cases has continued and partnership is strong, with the sense of not overwhelming families with agencies but sequencing interventions and allowing a bottom up approach to inform decisions whilst having strong management oversight through availability of managers and practice group discussions.

## **Areas for consideration and improvement**

59. Inspectors felt that the Impact of C-19 changes on frontline managers and the volume of work needed to be further considered. They also described a digital divide evident nationally and ensuring everyone has the right 'kit' has to be an ongoing priority. The impact of not having it is significant.
60. Inspectors felt plans could focus more on risk of harm to others. They noted peer navigators described pandemic as 'blessing and a curse' – and were thinking of post lockdown and what next so need more consideration of planning going forward.

### **Other issues of consideration arising from the inspection**

61. Inspectors were concerned about coping with a backlog of court work and other prosecution work delayed by the courts, outside the control of the Youth Offending Service.
62. Inspectors noted the challenges to contact with young people in the secure estate and the impact of C-19 restrictions on them while in custody.
63. Inspectors valued ensuring effective joint working with looked after young people involved in youth justice services wherever their placement.

### **Policy implications**

64. None were identified.

### **Community impact statement**

65. It is important to note that these two independent inspections should give some level of assurance that our services to the most vulnerable members of the community have been on the whole run effectively during this unprecedented pandemic.

### **Resource implications**

66. None were identified.

### **Legal implications**

67. None were identified.

### **Financial implications**

68. None were identified.

### **BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS**

<b>Background Papers</b>	<b>Held At</b>	<b>Contact</b>
None		

## APPENDICES

No.	Title
None	

## AUDIT TRAIL

<b>Lead Officer</b>	Alasdair Smith, Director, Children and Families		
<b>Report Author</b>	Alasdair Smith, Director, Children and Families		
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