

13 June 2017

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Dear Ian

Monitoring visit of Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council on 3 and 4 May 2017. The visit was the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged to be overall inadequate in October 2014. The visit was carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectors, Jansy Kelly and Tracey Metcalfe.

Inspectors have also undertaken four improvement visits between 2015 and 2016 to monitor the local authority's progress.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the local authority's services to care leavers. Specific areas of focus included:

- assessment and planning and the extent to which this is meaningful and timely for individual care leavers
- care leavers who were unaccompanied asylum-seeking children
- care leavers who are parents
- care leavers who are at risk of sexual exploitation
- provision of accommodation
- the impact of leaders and managers, including the quality of audit, quality assurance and performance management.

The visit considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, supervision files and observation of social workers and senior practitioners. In

addition, we spoke to several care leavers and a range of staff, including managers, social workers and personal advisers.

Overview

The local authority is making progress in improving services for its care leavers. Delivery against an appropriate improvement plan has led to tangible improvements to services for care leavers. These include increasing the number of care leavers that the local authority is in touch with, working with its young inspectors to improve the quality of support in the local authority's semi-independent unit and improving the quality and range of accommodation provision for care leavers. There is a clear focus on engaging young people in education, employment and training, and the local authority has successfully started to support the first three care leavers into apprenticeships within the council.

The quality of service to care leavers is impacted by some weaknesses in practice from across children's services, including the looked after children teams. Some young people have experienced a lack of support from their social workers and others have not had their vulnerabilities to potential abuse sufficiently assessed. Multiple changes of social workers and managers have also made it difficult for some care leavers to receive a consistent service and to build trusting relationships with staff.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Within the scope of this visit, there are areas of strength, areas where improvement is occurring and some areas where the progress has not met the expectations in the local authority's improvement plan.

Inspectors had the pleasure of speaking with many care leavers during this visit. Almost all had high praise for the work of their personal advisers and social workers, and countless examples of positive support were shared. For example, care leavers said that their workers have helped them to secure accommodation, to repair relationships with their birth families, to look for work and to gain confidence.

More recent assessments and pathway plans are of an improved standard. These include a greater sense of young people being actively engaged, with their voice, wishes and feelings recorded and referenced throughout. Consideration of friendships and young people's ability to make and sustain friends are reflected in the stronger assessments. However, the quality of needs assessments and pathway plans remains too variable, and some individual work with care leavers is very poor. Weaker assessment and planning do not contain a sense of the young person, their wishes and needs, are not outcome focused and do not consider all needs and risks. For some care leavers, assessments and plans are not relevant to their current circumstances and are in need of update and review.

In the audited cases, the local authority appropriately recognised that detailed chronologies, genograms and an overall story of the child's journey and lived experience are absent from most case records. A small number of young people have not received their full entitlement, due to some independent reviewing officers, managers and social workers not understanding their legal status and rights as care leavers.

There is an effective focus on engaging care leavers in education, employment and training. Children's educational attainment is prioritised while they are in care, and young people are actively encouraged to remain in education or training post 16. This is leading to gradual improvements in the attainment of care leavers and the opportunities available to them in terms of apprenticeships, further education and employment.

The local authority is strengthening the way that it works with adult services to promote smoother and timelier transitions for young people. This includes adult services colleagues now attending the placement panel to ensure that they are fully aware of these individual young people's needs. While progress is seen for young people entering transition, older care leavers are only now beginning to benefit from improved assessment and planning and therefore have experienced some delay.

Care leaving staff know the young people they work with well and are enthusiastic about helping them to achieve. They also demonstrate persistence in supporting young people, for example, when securing accommodation and maintaining contact with young people. However, in some cases, there are gaps in workers' understanding and a lack of curiosity about key issues for the young people. This includes not seeking to understand the young people's feelings and relationships with their families or the impact of issues from their past.

Workforce stability is improving because of a focus on recruitment and retention, and this is starting to have a positive impact on continuity for children. However, some care leavers have experienced multiple changes in worker, and this has hindered effective planning and positive relationships.

The local authority is proactive in taking responsibility for the welfare and resettlement of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. These children are appropriately assessed as children in need and, when appropriate, are looked after by the local authority. There is strong evidence of appropriate placement and sensitive support for these young people to adjust to a new language and culture. They are also supported to gain stability and to have their individual care needs met.

There is a suitable range of accommodation and support services for young parents. In the cases seen during this visit, care leavers who are parents are being supported to make good progress. For one young parent, this led to risks reducing and outcomes improving for the parent and child. For another, his identity as a parent and the needs that may arise from this were included throughout the assessment and pathway plan. However, the concept of care leavers as parents is not embedded

well enough in practice. This is a particular issue when the baby or child has a social worker, when some pathway plans do not consider the young people's identity as parents.

There are weaknesses in risk assessment for some care leavers who are at risk of sexual exploitation. During this visit a small number of cases were considered and weaknesses included gaps in multi-agency input, lack of the young people's views, limited analysis and actions that aim to reduce risk for the young people were not clearly identified. However, of the cases reviewed during the visit, no young people were identified at risk of immediate or unassessed sexual exploitation. More recent risk assessments show improvement and one young person, whose case was reviewed and who is supported by the child sexual exploitation team 'Evolve', has benefited from an assessment of good quality.

Very effective partnerships between children's services, housing and private providers ensure that appropriate accommodation is provided to care leavers. The quality of placements for young people is strong, including staying put arrangements, bespoke supported accommodation and independent living. Young people have the opportunity to delay their moves into independence until they are ready, and increasing numbers stay put with foster carers. They are also offered a wide range of practical and emotional support to help them to make the transition to adulthood and more independent living. Care leavers told inspectors that they are involved in identifying and selecting their homes from the different accommodation options available.

Supervision, challenge and management oversight continue to be areas for development for the local authority in its work with care leavers. There has been some improvement in quality assurance and the recording of management oversight by team managers. However, supervision of social workers, personal advisers and team managers is not sufficiently outcome focused, and a lack of timescales against actions means that there is drift and delay for some care leavers. Some staff from the looked after children teams have experienced unacceptable delays between their supervision sessions. With the exception of cases that have been audited, challenge about the quality of work with care leavers is not evident, and most cases also lack evidence of scrutiny and challenge from independent reviewing officers.

There is a developing performance management culture within the care leaver service. Fortnightly performance clinics ensure that managers are held to account for fully understanding their teams' performance. Most recently, the inclusion of care leavers' data within a new dashboard creates further opportunity to understand performance. This has only been in place for the past two weeks and, although already providing useful data, at this time it is not possible to determine its full impact on improving practice.

The audits completed for the visit contained relevant findings, focused on impact and outcomes for the individual care leavers and strengths and weakness were accurately

identified in most cases. There were, however, some practice issues, which were either missed or not explored sufficiently in the audits. In several of the tracked cases, actions from the audits had not been fully completed. Managers agreed that a more robust approach is needed in tracking and following up actions from audits.

All social workers and personal advisers, including social workers in their assessed and supported year in employment (ASYE), are extremely positive and motivated about working in Rotherham and value the support that they receive. Personal advisers and social workers in the care-leaving service are enthusiastic about working with the young people to improve their lives and help them to achieve their best outcomes. They are delighted about the opening of the recently refurbished young person-friendly building and are currently planning to expand the opportunities for care leavers to socialise and develop confidence and skills through a diary of regular courses, drop-in sessions and activities.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website on 13 June 2017.

Yours sincerely

Jansy Kelly
Her Majesty's Inspector