

12 October 2017

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Dear Steven

Monitoring visit of Tameside Borough Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit undertaken on 12 and 13 September 2017. The visit was the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in December 2016. The inspectors were Paula Thomson-Jones HMI and Stella Elliott HMI.

The local authority has made some progress in the period since the last monitoring visit, but the pace of change is too slow.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in respect of work with children who go missing and some aspects of work with children in care and care leavers. The visit considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, supervision files and notes, and discussions with social workers, managers and senior leaders. This monitoring visit considered progress against four recommendations.

- Ensure that when children go missing from home or care, the information gathered at return home interviews is used to inform planning effectively and to reduce future risk.
- Ensure that all care leavers have an up-to-date and good-quality pathway plan that reflects their current needs and circumstances, and that they have full information about their entitlements to support them into adult life.
- Ensure that support to the Children in Care Council enables effective representation of the views of children of all ages and those placed at a distance from the local authority. This should include work to ensure that the pledge to children looked after and care leavers is refreshed and communicated effectively to all children and young people.

- Ensure that the use of bed and breakfast accommodation for care leavers aged 18 to 25 ceases.

In addition, inspectors visited the Public Service Hub to check whether progress seen during the monitoring visit in March 2017 has been maintained.

Overview

There has been some progress in respect of all four recommendations since the inspection. Since the previous monitoring visit, priorities from the improvement plan have been translated into a '12-week plan'. Senior leaders are using this to track progress and performance in some key areas. This has not led to strong coordination of service improvement or consistent frontline practice. As a result, despite the hard work of staff and managers, the pace of change and improvement remains too slow.

Evaluation of progress

The service offered to children and families at the Public Service Hub continues to be better than at the time of the inspection. The improvements seen at the monitoring visit in March 2017 have been maintained. An extra manager has ensured that oversight remains effective, even though there is more work coming into the Hub. Contact records seen at this visit show good consideration of history, appropriate information-gathering and sound analysis to inform decision-making for children. The recent increase in police and health professionals in the Hub is positive, but it is too early to see any improvement to the quality of service. The planned introduction of a written referral form for professionals has not taken place. This means that social care staff are still processing and recording verbal information in order to make decisions about children's needs.

Work with children who go missing has improved since the inspection. Staff at the Public Service Hub now manage notifications about all missing children. They have effective working relationships with partner agencies, which ensure better information-sharing. A multi-agency panel coordinates the response to all children who go missing, to agree the most appropriate way to help them. All children in Tameside are now referred to a commissioned service for a return home interview. As a result of these changes, there has been an increase in the numbers of children being seen and spoken to about the time they are missing.

The quality of the records for return home interviews has improved since the inspection. In all cases seen during this visit, records show a quick response to the missing episode and efforts made to locate and meet with young people. The information that is recorded from these interviews is helping the police find children more quickly if they go missing again. In some cases, information gathered from interviews has informed care planning and made a difference to the outcomes for children. This is not consistent, and for some children looked after the reasons they give for going missing are not responded to quickly enough. The commissioned service provides detailed and regular data about its work, yet the local authority is

still not able to report via its own recording system on children missing. This is a significant gap and means that the authority cannot compare numbers of children who go missing with numbers who have return home interviews. The authority is also unable to run its own reports on timeliness of this work. This is a significant weakness in the local authority's work.

The service provided to care leavers, which was judged to require improvement at the time of the inspection, has not made enough progress. There continues to be delay in completing and reviewing pathway plans. This is because there are no clear arrangements in place to transfer work to the leaving-care team. There is also confusion about who should complete the plans and at what time. As a result, planning is not taking place early enough for young people. In addition, many plans are not informed by an updated assessment. Plans do not always address the changing needs of young people or the impact of significant life events. The recent appointment of a team manager for the service is helping to improve pathway planning. The local authority reports that the number of young people with an up-to-date pathway plan has increased in the last three months from 74.9% to 78%.

The size of the leaving-care team has increased and caseloads are lower. Inspectors saw evidence of staff spending more time with young people and giving them good-quality support. This includes help to meet their emotional, accommodation and financial needs. A new housing worker is working to improve accommodation choices, and young people are able to register for housing earlier. Furthermore, the council recently agreed that care leavers will be exempt from council tax until they are 21. No young people have been placed in bed and breakfast accommodation for six months. However, the local authority does not have access to a good range of accommodation for care leavers, which means that provision is unlikely to meet future demands.

At the time of the inspection, the Children in Care Council, called 2BeUS, was a small group of young people who did not represent all ages. Over the last 12 months, the numbers of children involved in 2BeUS activity has increased, but the number who attend formal meetings continues to be very small. 2BeUS has designed leaflets, organised social activities and taken part in awareness-raising events for elected members. Young people talking to the council about how leaving-care grants are spent has resulted in a change of policy. The local authority is running a pilot that enables young people to buy goods from a wider range of shops. A refreshed pledge to children looked after was relaunched earlier in the year. It remains unclear how this is going to be delivered. The young people have some goals; for example, 2BeUs wants to have a website, but there is no clear plan or timescale to make this happen.

The local authority has continued to undertake audits of casework. Audits seen during this visit were still too focused on compliance rather than outcomes for children. Audit activity does result in themes for improvement, but this does not then translate into wider service planning. The local authority has recently had some peer

support to review its audit activity. It is using this to revise and relaunch its audit programme.

Since the last monitoring visit, there has been a reduction in staff turnover. This is providing greater staff stability and capacity to make further improvements to services. However, despite staff and managers understanding what needs to improve, the absence of a clear plan that supports improvement in practice continues to impede progress.

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

Yours sincerely

Paula Thomson-Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector