

22 September 2017

Julian Wooster
Director of Children's Services
Somerset County Council
County Hall
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Dear Mr Wooster

Monitoring visit of Somerset local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Somerset local authority children's services on 22 and 23 August 2017. The visit was the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in February 2015. The inspectors were Emmy Tomsett HMI and Joy Howick HMI.

The local authority is making satisfactory progress from a low starting point in improving services for care leavers and disabled children.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in services for care leavers and disabled children, including:

- the quality and timeliness of pathway plans and health records for care leavers
- the extent to which care leavers receive clear and effective support into education, employment and training
- the range of and access to suitable accommodation for care leavers
- the extent to which management oversight and supervision of staff in the care leavers' service improve the quality of practice and decision-making
- the effectiveness of performance management and monitoring in tracking and responding to care leavers' experiences
- the quality of social work practice for disabled children, including management oversight and supervision.

A range of evidence was considered during the visit, including electronic case records, supervision files and notes, meeting with social workers and personal advisers, and other information provided by staff and managers. In addition, we spoke to two care leavers, who represented the Somerset care leavers, and to a range of staff, including managers, other practitioners and administrative staff.

Overview

Senior managers have appropriately prioritised improving frontline services for disabled children and care leavers. Steady progress has been made in implementing the recommendations for care leaver services made at the previous inspection. Consequently, improvements across the service are now contributing to sustained better outcomes for care leavers.

The engagement of care leavers is a key strength in improving the service. This is further supported by energetic and purposeful lines of communication between the Children in Care Council, Somerset Leaving Care Council and the corporate parenting board. Young people are actively involved in consultation on developments within their service and have contributed to the redesign of pathway plans, a new website and improved methods of communication with key professionals.

The local authority has a clear strategic focus on supporting all care leavers in finding suitable employment, education or training. In its role as a corporate parent, Somerset local authority provides a number of apprenticeships, employment opportunities and work experience opportunities for care leavers within the county council. Young people receive good support from the virtual school. Consequently, the number of care leavers in education, training and employment is increasing.

Young people receive a timely introduction and service from the care leavers' team, enabling effective joint working with social workers and personal advisers as the care leavers move towards independence and adulthood. Almost all care leavers benefit from a greater and better-quality choice of accommodation. However, improvements in ensuring that care leavers are supported to meet their own health needs have not kept pace with other parts of the service.

Although the timeliness of pathway plans is good, the quality of these plans is generally poor. Written plans can be lengthy and repetitive, making them difficult for young people to read.

While there is regular management oversight of casework within the care leavers' service, managers do not always recognise and address weaknesses in practice.

Leaders and managers recognise the need to build on improvements seen on this visit to ensure that all care leavers and disabled children receive a good quality of service.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Since the previous inspection, steady progress has been made in services for care leavers and disabled children. However, practice is not yet reliably good in all teams, and senior leaders understand the need for greater consistency and further improvement in some areas of service provision.

Overall, professional practice is becoming stronger, leading to better outcomes for most care leavers. A small but dedicated team of personal advisers is responsive to the needs of care leavers and offers effective support. Staff spoken to by inspectors know young people well. Arrangements to keep in touch with care leavers are purposeful and effective. Personal advisers use a range of methods to achieve this open communication. Care leavers are particularly enthusiastic about an extremely well-used messaging system that enables them to share their feelings with and seek support from key professionals.

Arrangements to monitor the welfare of care leavers are well established and effective in most cases. Safeguarding risks to care leavers are mostly well identified and responded to promptly by personal advisers. In circumstances in which young people choose not to engage with the leaving care service, their personal advisers can demonstrate that they make sustained attempts to stay in touch. However, this is not always evident in case recording.

Care leavers receive appropriate and timely support to understand their entitlements. Young people contributed extensively to the creation of a website that provides excellent and comprehensive information for young people.

Within the care leavers' service, performance information is systematically collated, evaluated and used by senior leaders to target areas for development. The accommodation available to care leavers has improved in both quality and variety, and the vast majority of care leavers live in suitable accommodation that meets their needs. Care leavers who are homeless, or in prison, or who live in accommodation deemed unsuitable through their own choice are well monitored and supported to find accommodation that meets their needs. Young people are supported effectively to learn independent living skills. Care leavers who wish to do so are well supported to remain living with former foster carers.

Senior managers have implemented a 'Choice for Life' strategy that provides an effective framework to support all vulnerable learners in education, training and employment. Good arrangements have been made with the virtual school to track and monitor the outcomes for care leavers effectively. The corporate parenting board effectively prioritises for care leavers opportunities for employment and apprenticeship, internally and with contractors. In addition, well-targeted support from personal advisers and the virtual school has resulted in the number of care leavers in education, training and employment steadily increasing from a low base. The percentage of care leavers in education, employment and training at time of the visit was 63%, compared to 50% at the time of the last inspection. Personal advisers

have greater expectations of what care leavers can achieve, and this is helping to improve the range of career opportunities they put forward to young people.

While the timeliness of pathway plans has significantly improved since the last inspection, the quality of written plans remains poor. They are not concise or easy to read and, consequently, young people do not always want to read them.

Care leavers cannot access their health histories easily, and some care leavers do not receive any information about their past health to help them to make informed decisions about their future health choices. Arrangements for care leavers who need ongoing support for their emotional and mental health needs are not smooth. While senior leaders have challenged adult services to improve these arrangements, some care leavers still wait too long to receive the level of support they need.

While management oversight of casework and formal supervision of staff within the care leavers' service are timely, they are not sufficiently effective in improving the quality of practice. Some management decisions are not well recorded following key events, and managers do not always challenge poor practice.

There is some evidence of auditing of children's files to quality assure casework, but the contribution that auditing makes to practice improvement within the care leavers' service is not clear. Senior managers recognise that quality assurance of casework by managers and through auditing is not yet sufficient to address all weaknesses in practice within the service.

Since the previous inspection, social workers in the disabled children's service benefit from reduced caseloads, increasing their effectiveness in supporting children. All children looked after reviews are timely, and there are clear actions for improving children's outcomes. Social workers reported their workload to be manageable and said that they are well supported by their line managers. Within the disabled children's service, inspectors saw examples of sensitive and thoughtful direct work, and good recognition and management of risks for children. The response to children's needs is swift in almost all cases, so problems do not escalate. However, the local authority has identified that quality of work in one team is weaker and has taken recent action to strengthen management arrangements to improve practice and to ensure that all disabled children receive a consistently good service.

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

Yours sincerely

Emmy Tomsett

Her Majesty's Inspector