

12 January 2018

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The Town Hall
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Dear Dawn

Monitoring visit to the London Borough of Wandsworth children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to the London Borough of Wandsworth children's services on 5 and 6 December 2017. The visit was the sixth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in December 2015. The inspectors were Emmy Tomsett HMI and Marcie Taylor HMI.

The local authority has recently made purposeful and well-targeted progress in improving services for its care leavers. However, it took the local authority some time to end the contractual arrangements with the previous provider of the care leavers' service and this has limited the pace of improvement. The quality of work in most areas has started to improve very recently. Senior leaders now need to increase the momentum of improvement so that good-quality practice is achieved as a matter of routine.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made regarding care leavers, 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 and safe 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 effectiveness of 'staying put' arrangements in ensuring continuity of accommodation while preparing for independence
- the extent to which care leavers are able to contribute to service development.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, supervision files and notes. We reviewed pathway plans and performance information as well as the refreshed Children's Services Improvement Plan. In addition, we spoke to a range of employees, including managers, social workers, other practitioners and administrative staff, as well as care leavers.

Overview

Senior leaders have made progress on all of the recommendations regarding the care leavers' service that were made at the last inspection. Well-targeted improvement measures that are being implemented and monitored across the service are now beginning to contribute to better outcomes for care leavers in most areas. Senior leaders have good awareness of the key strengths and weaknesses in the service. They recognise that the pace of change now needs to increase, and that they need to embed many of the newly implemented strategies and frameworks.

Following the last inspection, senior leaders took immediate steps to secure improvements to the care leavers' service, which was externally commissioned at that time. As subsequent improvements were not sustained, the service was transferred to local authority management in September 2017. Since that time, changes have been implemented that are having a positive impact on the service for care leavers. These include: a permanent increase in the number of personal advisers by two full-time equivalents to 13; and a permanent increase in the number of education, employment and training Connexions workers from one full-time equivalent to three. As a result, there has been a reduction in caseload numbers and this is leading to a better quality of engagement and direct work with young people.

Findings and evaluation of progress

The assistant director meets weekly with the management team of the care leavers' service, which is now called Future First. These meetings are used to identify where improvements are required and to monitor the impact of agreed actions. Senior managers know that they need to improve the quality and consistency of pathway planning and strengthen joint case-management arrangements when other services begin working with care leavers.

Management oversight of cases has received particular attention since the service came back in-house. As a result, by mid-November 2017, 97% of cases had been supervised within agreed time frames. The emphasis on supervision has been supported by a newly revised supervision template, to ensure that managers focus

on outcomes for young people; this practice is now embedding well. Workers told inspectors that they feel well supported by managers.

The quality of case recording is too variable and in most cases seen on this visit it was not detailed or specific enough. Personal advisers are able to articulate clearly the individual needs of the young people with whom they work. However, this knowledge is not always captured effectively in case records.

Care leavers in Wandsworth are not yet receiving timely support to start preparing them for independence. Senior managers have identified this, and are implementing arrangements to ensure that young people who are aged 16 are allocated a personal adviser to work alongside their social worker. However, these arrangements are very recent and have yet to lead to consistently improved outcomes for young people.

The number of young people in 'staying put' arrangements has increased very slightly, but continues to be low. 'Staying put' is not sufficiently promoted by professionals, and care leavers who spoke to inspectors were confused about the availability of, and opportunities offered by, these arrangements. Senior managers recognise this weakness, and have established a multidisciplinary task and finish group to better understand the reasons for the low numbers, and to ensure that an action plan is developed to actively promote these arrangements for more young people.

A number of initiatives are newly implemented or imminent, and are intended to improve the independent living skills offer of support for young people. These include: a former care leaver supporting the '12 steps to independence' preparation sessions; 'My bank' accredited financial planning workshops; and greater and earlier focus on preparing for independence following a review and update of the '12 steps' programme booklet. The recent introduction of a tracking document regarding 16- and 17-year-olds entitled to care leaving services enables senior managers to monitor placements and progress of preparation for independence, as well as suitability of placements and attendance at training and education courses.

Care leavers have had good opportunities to influence the design of the new service. They suggested the name 'Future First' and, as a result of their feedback, the council has refurbished the access area for care leavers to make a larger, more open, space with access to computers to encourage young people to drop in. This has been well received by the young people.

Staff at Future First have significantly improved the number of care leavers that they are in touch with to 97%, from a very low base. Efforts to engage with the five young people that they are not in touch with are well documented and case records demonstrate persistent efforts on the part of personal advisers.

At October 2017, 61% of care leavers were in education, employment or training, compared with 44% at the time of the inspection in 2015. This improvement has

been achieved through better joint working between the participation officer and the virtual school headteacher. Senior leaders are committed to ensuring that the focus on education, employment and training is sustained, and that these numbers continue to increase.

A number of dedicated lead roles have been established within Future First to target the needs of specific young people, such as a personal adviser post to support unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Young people who have been assessed as having substance misuse issues are supported by a specific worker from an external provider to provide a 'wrap-around' service. Currently, around 15 young people receive this support. However, the impact of this is not sufficiently clear in pathway plans and case records. In cases seen by inspectors, these new appointments are improving the offer of early help and support, and are starting to lead to better outcomes for care leavers.

Care leavers told inspectors that they have received a better quality of service since the inception of Future First. Most care leavers said that they feel well supported, and spoke energetically and passionately about the overall improvements that have been made to their service. Most care leavers said that they feel safe in their homes and described a significantly improved and varied offer of accommodation. However, some care leavers reported that previous changes to their allocated workers and their accommodation have adversely affected their preparation for independence.

Senior managers have strengthened arrangements considerably to ensure that care leavers have access to sufficient, suitable and safe accommodation. Effective partnership arrangements are in place between the housing department and Future First and there is a clear corporate commitment to sustaining this offer. In October 2017, 90% of care leavers were deemed to be in suitable accommodation, demonstrating a significant improvement from the last inspection. The use of bed and breakfast accommodation has ended and the local authority has reduced its reliance on semi-supported and independent accommodation.

Pathway plans continue to be too variable in quality. Assessments of risk are not routinely informing the plans, and plans are not always updated. 'Scaling' is used by workers to measure each young person's well-being and preparation for independence. However, the purpose and impact of this activity are unclear and scaling is not routinely resulting in a well-considered analysis of risk. Pathway plans do not sufficiently describe each young person's independence skills, and do not always explicitly detail the entitlements that the young person should receive. Senior managers recognise that while personal advisers can describe clearly the needs and wishes of the young person, this is not well reflected in plans. Pathway plans do not show any preparation for independence being undertaken with those young people who are placed in custody. However, the timeliness of pathway plans is consistently improving, with figures from October 2017 showing that 97% of care leavers had an up-to-date pathway plan. Most plans provide evidence of good partnership working,

particularly with housing and health, although engagement with probation services is weaker.

A summary of each care leaver's health history is provided by the looked after children's nurse and stored on case records. This information is copied into 'health passports' for the young people to keep. Health histories of care leavers looked at by inspectors have been completed very recently, and do not all contain the up-to-date health information from the young people's time in care. As a result, care leavers are not currently gaining access to their full health history and this is also not being included in their pathway plans. The system for updating and storing this information is not sufficiently clear.

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