

1 August 2016

Frances Craven
Strategic Director, Children's Services
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Dear Ms Craven

Monitoring visit of Leicester City local authority children's services.

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit of Leicester City children's services on 23 and 24 June 2016. The visit was the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in March 2015.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in services provided by the local authority to support care leavers and children looked after eligible for care-leaving services.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, supervision files and notes, performance data and examples of good practice provided by the local authority. In addition, they spoke to a range of staff, including personal advisers, social workers, team and service managers and senior leaders.

Summary of findings

- Significant progress has been made in ensuring that services for care leavers are managed effectively and, as a result, support for care leavers is improving.
- Reliable and reasonably comprehensive performance data is now available and being used by managers to improve outcomes for care leavers.
- Despite additional investment in staffing, increasing demand means that caseloads for personal advisers in the 16-plus service remain too high to enable consistently good support to care leavers.

- Workers are starting the process of identifying the particular needs of each young person and planning their pathways for leaving care much earlier than at the time of the original inspection. As a result, the planning and the preparations made to help the young people leave care are much more reliable.
- Care leavers are provided with good quality information on their health histories before they leave care.
- All care leavers have a pathway plan. Most of these are up to date and are regularly reviewed. The effectiveness of these plans is, however, too variable. Many lack a coherent longer-term plan and most do not include timescales for proposed actions. The views of care leavers are not always evident in the plan and the format of the plan does not make them accessible for young people. Reviews do not routinely involve other agencies.
- The local authority has developed its 'staying put' offer. At the time of the visit, 22 care leavers were living with their former foster families compared with 10 care leavers during the 2015 inspection.
- Nearly all care leavers are provided with safe and suitable accommodation, with appropriate use of homes of multiple occupation. The service is in contact with nearly all care leavers. At the time of the inspection, four young people were not in stable or suitable accommodation. In these cases, risk assessments had been undertaken and persistent action was being taken to re-engage the young people and promote their safety.
- Care leavers in custody and on remand have a basic pathway plan in place. Those with more complex needs and vulnerabilities have their welfare monitored effectively, with early and effective joint planning of support, to help prepare young people on release from custody.
- Transition planning for care leavers who have special educational needs and/or disabilities is not sufficiently joined up. While examples of good joint working with adult services were seen by inspectors, in other cases, planning was poorly coordinated.
- Fewer care leavers are not in education, employment or training (NEET) than was found in the 2015 inspection and this is an improving picture. A significant number of young people, however, remain NEET and this is not always addressed with sufficient tenacity by their personal advisers.

- The local authority's case audits were accurate and of good quality. They demonstrated that managers had a sound understanding of what is good practice.
- Staff in the 16-plus service spoken to by inspectors showed a consistently strong commitment to providing a good service to care leavers and to working for Leicester City. They were confident in the local authority's commitment to improve services but saw continuing high caseloads for personal advisers as the biggest obstacle to this.

Evaluation of progress

The 2015 single inspection highlighted specific areas requiring improvement for care leavers. These included:

- ensuring that pathway planning began earlier for 16- and 17-year-olds
- ensuring that risk assessments were undertaken for care leavers living in unsuitable accommodation
- providing health histories to young people when they leave care
- strengthening the review of pathway plans.

This visit found significant progress in all these areas.

Needs assessments and pathway plans are now routinely undertaken for all 16- and 17-year-old young people looked after to support their transition to adulthood, although the quality and effectiveness of these plans remain too variable. All care leavers living in unsuitable accommodation have a written risk assessment, which is regularly reviewed and updated. However, not all risk assessments seen by inspectors clearly evaluated current risks and how these might be mitigated. In all cases seen, attention was given, through pathway planning, to providing care leavers with information about their health histories. Pathway plans are subject to regular review and management oversight, but few reviews involved partner agencies. Overall, therefore, significant but not consistently good progress has been made in addressing the concerns identified in the previous inspection.

The 2015 inspection also highlighted weaknesses in performance data and pathway plans. Progress was being made in engaging care leavers in education, employment or training (EET), but from a low base. Some concerns were also raised about the use of homes of multiple occupancy and the practice of care leavers being routinely seen through office visits rather than in their home environment. Again, in all these areas, this visit found progress but also more work to be done in some key areas.

At the time of the 2015 inspection, reliable performance data was not available or being used effectively. Substantial progress has been made in both the availability

and use of performance information. The proportion of care leavers who are NEET has reduced from 51% in March 2015 to 43% in April 2016, but this figure remains too high and not all care leavers have robust plans to support them in this area. The local authority has been robustly monitoring its use of homes of multiple occupancy and no examples of inappropriate use were found on this visit. Similarly, no cases were seen of inappropriate or excessive reliance on office visits.

While all care leavers now have a relevant pathway plan, most of the plans seen required improvement. Particular weaknesses included a lack of specificity in actions and timescales, a failure to capture a young person's views and a lack of longer-term and contingency planning. Some, but not all, of these weaknesses can be linked to the current format of the plan, and managers are rightly planning to introduce a more user-friendly version. A further weakness identified on this visit was around joint transition planning for care leavers who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. In some cases, this means that planning with adult services does not begin early enough or is done in parallel rather than jointly.

The progress found on this visit can be directly related to the steps that managers and workers have taken to improve services. There has been a strong and necessary focus on ensuring compliance with basic standards, and has been largely successful. Workers' commitment to the welfare of care leavers and to forming effective relationships is strongly evident. The quality and effectiveness of the support, however, remain variable and so the experience and progress of care leavers are not yet good. To achieve good, alongside continued compliance, managers need to now focus on improving the quality of services. This should include offering opportunities for more reflective supervision and reducing the high caseloads of personal advisers.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Nicholas McMullen

Senior Her Majesty's Inspector