

24 August 2017

Mr Andrew Dempsey
Director of Children's Services
Torbay Children's Services
First Floor South
Town Hall
Castle Circus
Torquay
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Dear Mr Dempsey

Third monitoring visit to Torbay local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Torbay children's services on 25 and 26 July 2017. The visit was the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in January 2016. The inspectors were Emmy Tomsett HMI and Margaret Burke HMI. They were accompanied by Shirley Bailey, senior HMI, and Fiona Mongredien from the Department for Education.

The local authority is making slow progress from a low starting point to improve services for care leavers in Torbay. Council-wide ownership and understanding of what it means to be a good corporate parent are improving, but remain weak.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made for care leavers, including:

- the quality and timeliness of pathway plans for care leavers
- how effectively the local authority discharges its duty as a corporate parent to care leavers
- the extent to which care leavers receive clear and effective advice and guidance regarding their entitlements
- how well management oversight and supervision of staff in the care leavers' service are used to improve the quality of practice and decision-making
- the quality and use of performance management and monitoring to track and respond to care leavers' experiences
- the effectiveness of quality assurance arrangements in improving outcomes for care leavers.

The visit considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, supervision records, other supporting documentation and discussions with care leavers and a range of staff, including social workers, team managers and the heads of service.

Overview

Despite recently accelerated progress and well-targeted intervention by the director of children's services and his team, a failure to prioritise the needs of children looked after and care leavers across the wider council has slowed the overall pace of change. Frontline services for vulnerable children and care leavers have not been sufficiently supported by wider service provision in the council. Housing options for care leavers, for example, are very limited. The revived corporate parenting board has not yet established links with the Children in Care Council or care leavers, and feedback on the experiences of care leavers is not systematically gathered or considered by the local authority.

The local authority has made steady progress in some areas of development in the quality of practice for care leavers since the last inspection. The advice that care leavers receive about next steps, including their entitlements, has improved significantly, and pathway planning for care leavers, while not yet good, is now at least of adequate quality. However, the quality of performance information and quality assurance arrangements specifically for care leavers have not kept pace with those of other areas of the service and lack accuracy and rigour. These deficits reduce the local authority's understanding of the strengths and weaknesses in the care leavers' service. Senior leaders were unaware of some areas for improvement until inspectors highlighted them during this visit.

While no young people were identified during this visit to be at risk of immediate or significant harm, a very small number of care leavers were referred to senior managers due to delays in their personal advisers or social workers recognising and taking action to reduce risk. In these cases, professionals had been over-optimistic about care leavers' resilience; they had not recorded the help provided and, in one case, they had not provided the care leaver with appropriate help.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Based on the evidence gathered during the visit, inspectors identified some areas in which there are improvements, and some areas in which progress has been too slow.

Care leavers are supported by a small, stable team of dedicated staff. However, caseloads are reported by personal advisers and managers to be high, and this adversely affects the quality of support that care leavers receive. Safeguarding risks to care leavers are not identified or responded to appropriately in a minority of cases, and this poor practice is further compounded by weak management scrutiny of practice.

Care leavers do not always receive appropriate help when the need first arises. Staff do not monitor all care leavers' circumstances regularly enough, and visits to care leavers have not always been sufficiently timely or purposeful. Senior managers have not provided guidance to staff that sets out the expected frequency of visits to young people. A policy outlining the minimum frequency of visits was issued during the course of this monitoring visit, but the shortfall had not been identified by senior managers through scrutiny of casework and performance information and was pointed out by inspectors.

Arrangements to keep in touch with care leavers by text message and by telephone are good, and there is evidence of sustained and persistent attempts by personal advisers to engage with young people. However, it is not always detailed in case records or pathway plans when care leavers do not wish to have any contact with personal advisers.

When care leavers are engaged with services, their wishes and feelings are mostly well reflected and considered in pathway planning. The timeliness of pathway plans has improved from a low base, but, overall, requires further improvement. Each care leaver now has a newly revised pathway plan document, and most examples were at least adequate, although there continues to be variability in the quality and effectiveness of these plans. Plans are not yet routinely updated following significant events experienced by the young person and do not routinely contain timescales. In some cases, this results in delay in the young person receiving support. However, inspectors also saw some examples of care leavers receiving timely help. Care leavers spoken to by inspectors reported that they feel well supported by personal advisers, who are accessible and responsive to their needs.

Arrangements to ensure that care leavers are aware of their entitlements have been significantly strengthened. An 'Integrated youth support service after care handbook' and an entitlement sheet are routinely distributed to care leavers. A new website has been launched to encourage care leavers to access relevant information easily and readily through this route. As a result of these improvements, care leavers spoken to by inspectors were aware of their entitlements and knew how to obtain further information if necessary.

Access to public housing for care leavers is limited by a corporate failure to ensure that there is enough housing provision for young people. As a result, many care leavers live in privately rented accommodation that lacks the security that social housing affords. Additionally, support to care leavers who have mental health needs is weak. While the local authority is seeking to address this deficit and improve access to mental health services for care leavers, this remains a challenge.

The local authority ring fences some apprenticeship opportunities for care leavers. However, the number available does not demonstrate sufficient corporate commitment to prioritising employment opportunities for care leavers in the authority.

The quality of management oversight in the care leavers' service is poor. There is not enough scrutiny of the quality of work. Management oversight does not always sufficiently recognise or challenge poor practice. The quality and timeliness of case recording are significant weaknesses, and these have not been recognised, identified or addressed by senior leaders or managers in the care leavers' service. Supervision of staff is inconsistent, both in its frequency and in its challenge of poor practice. Delays experienced by care leavers are not routinely identified by managers, and subsequent management plans, when in place, lack timescales. Very recent arrangements to strengthen the quality of supervision are beginning to be evident in some case files through more effective recording and tracking of actions. However, management oversight is not yet consistently contributing to improving outcomes for care leavers.

While auditing activity is leading to demonstrable improvements in other areas of the service, its contribution to improving outcomes for care leavers is negligible. The number of audits routinely completed in the care leavers' service is insufficient to effectively identify emerging strengths or weaknesses and track outcomes for young people. Collation of lessons learned from audit activity is poor in this part of the service. The audits that have been completed are not sufficiently challenging: four of the six audits completed by the local authority for this monitoring visit were over-optimistic and did not sufficiently consider the effect of poor practice on young people.

The use of performance information and data to identify strengths and weaknesses and track outcomes for care leavers is improving, but has not kept pace with that of other areas of children's services. Although data is available to senior managers, performance information and data in relation to care leavers reviewed at the monthly team manager performance meetings is currently limited to two performance indicators: the number of care leavers in suitable accommodation and the number not in employment, education or training (NEET). Despite the improved access to performance data, the local authority is not currently meeting its target of a maximum of 40% of care leavers NEET; 52% of care leavers are recorded as NEET. Furthermore, performance management information on the number of care leavers in suitable accommodation is inaccurate, due to data inputting errors. Those care leavers placed in homelessness hostels or who are moving between friends or relatives are unacceptably reported as living in suitable accommodation. This gives senior leaders a falsely positive view of the quality of accommodation for care leavers. Important omissions in the collection of performance information in relation to care leavers remain. Senior leaders do not have access to data regarding the frequency of visits to care leavers, the number of care leavers placed out of area, the stability of their accommodation or the number who contribute to their pathway plans.

While the pace of change in other areas of the service has been steady and improvements have been implemented and monitored effectively, the quality of service that care leavers receive is not improving swiftly enough. The local authority

accepts that the support offered to care leavers is not reliably effective and much more work is required to achieve a good standard.

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