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15 June 2018

Ms Hilary Brooks
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Dear Ms Brooks

Focused visit to Southampton children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Southampton children's services on 22 and 23 May 2018 carried out by Linda Steele and Donna Marriott, Her Majesty's Inspectors.

Inspectors reviewed the local authority's arrangements to support care leavers and children looked after who are eligible for care leaving services. Inspectors reviewed a range of evidence, including young people's case records, case discussions with social workers, personal advisers and young people. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information.

Overview

The Ofsted single inspection in 2014 found that services to children in Southampton required improvement to be good and that services to care leavers were inadequate. Since that time, a determined and stable senior leadership team has made positive improvements to the services for care leavers, supported by a strong commitment and financial investment from political leaders. The local authority in its role as corporate parent now demonstrates a real commitment to improving outcomes for young people. The vast majority of young people now live in suitable accommodation and personal advisers are regularly in touch with them.

Senior managers have a clear vision and know what still needs to be done. They recognise that there remains some variability in practice, particularly in respect of the

quality of assessments, pathway plans, and case recording. Practitioners are not always sufficiently creative or persistent enough in engaging young people in return home interviews. The use of bed and breakfast accommodation is low due to improved housing options but managers do not oversee these arrangements rigorously enough.

The number of young people in education, employment and training is well below the national average. Some progress has been made in increasing the number of young people in higher education and apprenticeships.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- the quality of needs assessments, including the assessment of risk when using unsuitable accommodation
- care leavers' access to their health histories
- the take up and quality of return home interviews.

Findings

- Since the last inspection, the local authority has restructured its services for care leavers. A dedicated service now provides support to children and young people from 14 years onwards. This service is making a tangible difference for some care leavers, enabling them to make successful transitions to independence. Social workers and personal advisers work closely together to ensure that young people becoming care leavers receive a seamless service.
- Care leavers and personal advisers report a much-improved service over the past year and, in particular, since the number of staff in the team was increased in January 2018. Social workers and personal advisers receive regular supervision and they report good access to their managers.
- Personal advisers are tenacious in maintaining contact and see young people regularly. Consequently, the local authority is in touch with all but one young person. For those young people remanded to custody, contact meets required standards, but personal advisers could on occasions be more proactive in order to give young people the best chance of a successful transition into independence.
- Personal advisers know their young people well and engage them in pathway planning. Most care leavers have active plans in place, although these vary in quality. Some lack sufficient focus on the young person's lived experience or analysis of their situation. This has been identified within the local authority's own audits. Senior managers have taken action, which includes piloting a social media application, to enhance engagement of young people in real time in their pathway planning.

- Social workers and personal advisers prioritise care leavers' safety. They recognise risks such as those related to trafficking, exploitation and possible radicalisation. Personal advisers make good use of their influence with other professionals to support young people to stay safe. Nevertheless, when young people go missing, it is not always possible to see how creative and persistent social workers are in engaging them in return home interviews and these are not always well recorded. Some records of interviews lack detail and analysis that would inform intelligence gathering and risk management for individual young people.
- Six care leavers are currently engaged in apprenticeship schemes. There is appropriate support in place for young people who wish to enter higher education and there are currently 12 care leavers attending university. Nevertheless, the proportion of Southampton care leavers in education, employment or training is significantly lower than elsewhere. Young people not in education, employment or training are tracked and receive appropriate advice and support from the Solent traineeship engagement and participation (STEP) support officer. They are encouraged to take part in programmes such as the Prince's Trust, but efforts to engage young people in education, employment or training have not been successful. Senior managers have recently taken more rigorous action, including targeted careers support, fast tracking Southampton City Council apprenticeship adverts and, more recently, introducing regular tracking meetings with personal advisers. It is too early to demonstrate the impact of this action.
- Care leavers benefit from access to a wide range of suitable accommodation. Housing options are available to care leavers, including foster care, supported lodgings, training flats, semi-supported and independent accommodation. Young people are helped effectively to prepare for having their own tenancy through the intensive and practical support provided. Support is effective in helping care leavers to make a successful transition to independent living when the time is right for them. Care leavers who wish to 'stay put' with their carers, including those young people in independent fostering arrangements, are supported well. Young people who met inspectors advised that they felt safe and were satisfied with their accommodation.
- Bed and breakfast establishments have been used as a last resort for five care leavers in the past six months. These arrangements are not always subject to rigorous assessment to ensure that any potential risk is understood and responded to.
- A range of professionals, including the family nurse partnership, provide good support to care leavers. However, personal advisers report that it can be challenging to access timely emotional and mental health support for young people. Of 138 care leavers, 27 are parents. There is a comprehensive support package available to young parents and inspectors saw some good examples of support and intervention.

- There is variability in the quality of management oversight and supervision. Inspectors saw some good quality, reflective, analytical supervision and management oversight, but this is not consistently the case. Workers find supervision useful and it takes place regularly.
- Care leavers are informed of their entitlements and are well supported to obtain important documentation, such as national insurance numbers, birth certificates and passports. Despite this, not all care leavers have been provided with information about their health histories. This is an important omission as it means that not all young people will understand their health background, which may be important when seeking medical treatment in the future. Senior managers are aware of this concern and are in discussion with health providers to address this.
- Workers are aspirational for their young people and celebrate their successes. Care leavers describe strong and meaningful relationships with their personal advisers. They feel supported by independent visitors and advocates, who champion on their behalf and help improve their outcomes.
- Strengthened performance management, including data collection and auditing, has resulted in a more accurate analysis and understanding of the key priorities.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning your next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Linda Steele

Her Majesty's Inspector