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Debbie Jones  
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Dear Debbie

### **Monitoring visit to Tower Hamlets local authority children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to the London Borough of Tower Hamlets children's services on 11 and 12 December 2018. This was the fifth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate for overall effectiveness in April 2017. The inspectors were Brenda McLaughlin and Louise Warren, two of Her Majesty's Inspectors, and Tom Anthony, an Ofsted inspector.

Inspectors evaluated the quality of care planning for children in care, in particular the achievement of timely permanence for children who are unable to live with their birth parents. They assessed progress since the visit in August 2018, focusing on areas of practice that required significant improvement. Inspectors also considered the local authority's arrangements for care leavers, including the timely preparation of children in care for the transition to adulthood and independence.

The visit considered a range of evidence, including discussions with social workers, personal advisers and their managers. Inspectors looked in detail at children's cases and met with the chair of the Tower Hamlets Foster Carers Association. They spoke to the service managers responsible for the help and protection of children, care leavers and children in care. In addition, inspectors looked at local authority performance management information and they read improvement board and operational board minutes and reports on recent audit activity.

### **Overview**

Effective action taken by leaders and managers following the August monitoring visit has led to considerable improvements in the quality of social work practice for children in care. Permanence planning for those children who are unable to live safely with their birth parents is being progressed more quickly. All permanence options, including special guardianship orders and adoption, are beginning to be considered simultaneously. The arrangements for senior managers to track the progress of children in care have substantially improved. Children who leave care in

Tower Hamlets benefit from advice and support from a stable and highly committed group of personal advisers, social workers and managers, who know them well. Senior managers accept that their ambitious plans to reconfigure the care leavers' service need to progress more quickly.

## **Findings**

For those children who become looked after, decision-making is timely. Most children now have a plan for permanence by their second statutory review. The timeliness of initial health assessments is improving from a low base. The introduction of a monthly permanence 'summit meeting' to measure progress is a positive development. Family finding, carried out jointly with the permanence and adoption support team, begins early. Sensitive work with birth parents is helping to minimise delay, ensuring that children have permanent and stable homes if they cannot live with their families. Further work is needed to ensure that care plans are recorded clearly and that older children in care are involved in compiling their individual plans.

Staff described to inspectors a positive change in the culture within the service. Morale is good and social workers in the children in care service have manageable caseloads. They report that they are well supported, and they have welcomed the tri-weekly morning team meetings that focus on their practice. Bespoke training, commissioned since August, and additional management capacity, have helped to improve the quality of assessments. The majority of children in care now have an up-to-date assessment. This is a substantial improvement from the previous monitoring visit, when 180 children did not have a current assessment of their needs. Investment in training and additional resources are encouraging social workers to want to stay and work in Tower Hamlets; some agency workers have applied for permanent positions. Social workers feel listened to and supported to develop their skills and knowledge. They visit children regularly and get to know them well. However, not all visits are purposeful, and direct work to help all children to understand their personal histories needs to be routinely recorded on the child's file.

Management oversight is regular, and inspectors found some good examples of analytical case supervision to ensure that children's plans progress effectively. However, this practice is not yet consistent. Independent reviewing officers are now expected to review children's progress every six weeks, in order to provide additional scrutiny. In the last quarter, an increasing number of younger children have entered care in an emergency. In a minority of these cases, young children have remained in harmful situations for too long. Senior and middle managers are aware that they need to do more to sustain progress in protecting neglected children who are at risk of harm.

Performance management has been enhanced with the introduction of 'practice weeks'. This provides senior managers with opportunities for 'real time' insight into the quality of practice. Learning from routine audit activity and detailed analysis of the key findings are leading to continuous, improved performance in the quality of

work in frontline teams. Detailed feedback is provided immediately to social workers and areas for improvement are identified and acted on quickly.

Managers and personal advisers work diligently to advocate on behalf of care leavers. Personal advisers know young people well and have a good understanding of their individual needs and circumstances. Their creative and tenacious work is supporting young people in custody to retain their accommodation. Persistent contact with vulnerable children with addiction problems is helping to reduce risks. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, many of whom have suffered trauma, have prompt access to specialist services.

Pathway plans are thorough and up to date. They directly involve young people, whose voices and wishes are clearly articulated. Plans are realistic and practical, and they reflect care leavers' experiences. Swift action is taken to ensure that vulnerable young people are provided with specific help and support. Inspectors saw several comments from young people thanking staff for their help.

Better quality and suitable accommodation for care leavers is being re-commissioned. A multi-disciplinary housing panel considers young people's specific vulnerabilities and tailors support to help young people to remain in their homes. An increasing number of care leavers are enabled to live with their foster carers after they reach the age of 18. The chair of the Tower Hamlets Foster Carers Association reported to inspectors that the support and response to carers, particularly out-of-hours, have improved.

The introduction of a 'through-care service', co-located with other professionals for children aged 14 to 25, is intended to ensure that these children achieve well as young adults. The pace of these changes needs to accelerate. Closer links with the virtual school and the development of specific personal education plans for care leavers are starting to increase the proportion of young people in education and employment. As part of this transformation, managers have listened to care leavers' views and have retained a separate, dedicated 'drop in' and duty service to address young people's immediate concerns.

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

Yours sincerely

Brenda McLaughlin  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**