

11 March 2019

Mr Chris Munday
Strategic Director for Children and Young People
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Dear Mr Munday

Monitoring visit of Barnet local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Barnet local authority children's services on 14 and 15 February 2019. This visit was the sixth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in July 2017. The inspectors were Louise Warren, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Joy Howick, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors found that the quality of practice within the care leavers' service has improved steadily since the last inspection, with a wider range of appropriate services on offer to support young people in achieving positive outcomes.

Areas covered by the visit

During this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the care leavers' service, including:

- the quality of practice for care leavers and children in care who are moving into independence
- the quality of case recording, management oversight and supervision. This includes the use and effectiveness of performance management and quality assurance information
- the previous inspection recommendation to improve care leavers' ownership of pathway plans and the quality and timeliness of targets to improve their lives
- that care leavers have the tools, such as money management, to cope with life's challenges and are fully aware of the 'Pledge' and their entitlements.

A range of evidence was considered during this visit, including electronic case records, observations of social workers and personal advisers, and other information provided by staff and managers. In addition, inspectors spoke to a range of staff, including managers, social workers and personal advisers, as well as one young person.

Overview

The local authority has continued to focus steadily on developing and delivering improvements to the 'onwards and upwards' service for care leavers since the previous inspection. As corporate parents, senior leaders and managers have worked effectively with relevant partner agencies, at both a strategic and operational level, to progress and sustain change across all areas of practice. While some of these changes and developments are now well established and are offering better opportunities and outcomes for young people, some are not fully embedded. These include the local offer and the implementation and changes to the pathway planning processes. Other initiatives are relatively new and have yet to fully demonstrate impact, for example the two new staff and two deputy managers who will be joining the service in the near future, in order to increase management and staff capacity. The local authority is fully aware of the areas requiring further improvement and have relevant plans in place to address these.

Positive changes to the 'onwards and upwards' office base have been developed with feedback and participation from young people. The centre is welcoming, and appropriately child-centred, enabling young people to 'drop in' on a regular basis, either informally or to attend planned events and activities. Specialist services, including mental health counselling, education, training and employment advice, offer effective and timely support to care leavers, including some young people who have been previously hard to engage.

Inspectors found that the quality of practice for care leavers is still too variable. Some young people experience high levels of consistent, regular and skilled planning to help and support them, from staff who know them well and have positive relationships with them. This is helping them to sustain and achieve positive outcomes and changes in their lives. However, for other young people, while pathway plans are in place, their voices and views are not clearly represented within these. Risks and complexities, including appropriate contingency planning, are not fully identified, and actions to help young people achieve their aspirations and positive outcomes are insufficiently detailed.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Inspectors met with staff from 'onwards and upwards' and two children in care teams. All staff positively reported about working in Barnet; they have seen helpful changes since the last inspection and feel well supported to work effectively with young people. Caseloads were reported to be manageable for most staff, although some were high, and for others had recently increased. This impacts on the amount of time that staff can spend with young people and keep their records up

to date. Managers are aware of this and have two new staff starting in the near future in order to increase capacity. All staff who met with inspectors demonstrated commitment to achieving improved outcomes for young people.

Management oversight and supervision is not consistent, reflective or regular. Inspectors found gaps in the last year, where supervision had taken place infrequently, and in some cases, social workers had been supervised by three different managers during the year. Senior managers recognise that there has been a turnover of managers in the service. Steps have been taken to mitigate this by recruiting two new deputy team managers, but the impact of this is not yet evident. Management capacity from the children in care service has also been used to offer supervision sessions to staff, but this is only a short-term solution in supporting staff and is not fully effective. Staff spoke positively about group supervision, and report that managers readily offer informal guidance and support. However, this guidance is not routinely recorded, and this is a missed opportunity to evidence management oversight for important decisions for young people.

The auditing framework and the quality of the case audits seen by inspectors continue to be detailed and identify most of the practice issues for children and young people. However, inspectors found that within one case audit, some elements of practice relating to the risks to a young person were viewed more positively by both auditors. Senior managers are fully aware of this and understand the need to ensure that case auditing and the action points arising from audits remain robust.

Performance management information is clear and demonstrates improved performance for key indicators, such as the number of young people who are in education, employment or training, which was at 67% in December 2018, compared to 44% at the time of the previous inspection. Documents made available to inspectors identify the improvements already made in the service and acknowledge areas of improvement. These align with evidence found by inspectors during this visit. For example, the local offer for care leavers is currently in draft form and is being consulted on with young people before it is officially launched.

Transition planning for children in care into independence is variable. The allocation of personal advisers is not happening early enough for most children. Inspectors saw evidence of transition planning happening for children when they were around 17 and a half years old. This leaves little time to make appropriate arrangements, particularly for housing options. This is an acknowledged area for development.

Transition planning for young people with disabilities is generally timely, although managers are aware that in complex situations, planning must start early enough to promptly address any changes in circumstances. However, in better practice seen, transition planning was sensitively aimed at the pace of the young person, with a focus on independence skills and continuity of social worker, before handing over to personal advisers.

Within practice, personal advisers keep in touch with young people, and build reliable and positive relationships. However, the quality of written pathway plans and needs assessments is inconsistent. Most assessments lack historical information, input from significant family members or carers, and a thorough analysis of key risks or issues. This means that information to inform the pathway plan and provide effective support to young people is sometimes limited and does not always address the complex needs of the young people concerned. Risk assessments are of better quality and more accurately reflect the lived experiences of the young person and the risks facing them.

The quality of pathway plans and the participation of young people in them is also inconsistent. This limits their effectiveness. For example, contingency plans and actions to achieve change were not always clearly identified or recorded. Although young people's aspirations were noted, how and what was needed to achieve them was not always evident in plans. A new template to improve pathway plans, 'all about me', is being developed with young people and is to be implemented by April 2019. Recording in case notes is generally more thorough and provides a better picture of the young person than the key stand-alone documents.

Some young people receive strong support and interventions from their personal advisers. For example, support is given to live independently, attend university, complete in-depth life-story book work to address complex issues of identity and family history or to access mental health counselling. These interventions are enabling young people to progress in their lives and help mitigate the risks they are facing. Feedback from young people has highlighted the importance of continuity of personal advisers, and the service has worked hard to decrease changes of staff so that relationships with young people can be more stable and purposeful.

Specialist staff and effective partnership working are in place to deliver timely support to care leavers, including young people who have been hard to engage. For example, a specialist social worker works with unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people, providing specific expertise to support them.

Specific projects to provide mentoring and support to young people to enter education, employment or training are in place, leading to positive take up of apprenticeships and work experience by young people. During 2018, a new mental health counselling service, provided by a not-for-profit organisation, was established and is enabling some young people who would not qualify for adult mental health services to access support. It also provides helpful clinical consultation to staff. This is being expanded to fulfil demand, as it is popular and helpful for young people.

Effective partnership working with housing providers is in place, with a specialist link worker managing and overseeing housing offers and rent arrears. This means that if young people get into difficulties with their tenancies, help and support are readily accessible. This enables young people to retain their properties. Offers of accommodation are tailored to the needs of young people; choices are local, and senior managers use flexibility if, for example, a young person needs to stay in

semi-independent accommodation for longer than originally planned. However, inspectors noted that, for some young people, the use of one-bedroomed flats as temporary accommodation before permanent tenancies are offered can lead to unnecessary moves and disruption.

In summary, the quality of social work practice is improving steadily, and developments in the service are helping to make a positive difference to outcomes for young people. Inspectors found appropriate support and help offered to care leavers, with some strong practice for some young people. However, there is more work to do to improve pathway planning, managerial oversight and supervision to ensure practice is consistent for all young people to achieve better outcomes.

I am copying this letter to the Department of Education.

Your sincerely,

Louise Warren

Her Majesty's Inspector