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30 September 2019

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Dear Mr Spencer

Monitoring visit of Gloucestershire children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Gloucestershire children's services on 5 September 2019. The visit was the seventh monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in March 2017. The inspectors were Nicola Bennett and Emmy Tomsett, Her Majesty's Inspectors.

There is still more to do to improve services to care leavers and consistency of practice, particularly management oversight, the quality and relevance of pathway plans and timeliness of interventions. While some of the recommendations from the last inspection have been progressed, such as keeping in touch with care leavers, a number of areas identified for improvement remain.

Areas covered by the visit

During this visit, inspectors reviewed progress made in a number of key areas, including:

- the effectiveness of arrangements for keeping in touch with young people who have left care, the quality of pathway plans, the suitability of accommodation and the availability of health histories
- management oversight, challenge and staff supervision
- the arrangements for responding to allegations against adults who work or volunteer with children and young people.

The visit considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, supervision files and notes, performance data and other information provided by

staff and managers. In addition, inspectors spoke to a range of staff, including managers, social workers, leaving care workers and the designated officer.

Overview

Most care leavers now benefit from regular, responsive visiting and positive relationships with their workers. Increasingly purposeful and timely planning and interventions help to improve the circumstances of young people. However, support is not effective in all areas.

While the majority of pathway plans are completed within required timescales, the quality is variable, and they are not routinely updated when young people's circumstances change. Not all care leavers have access to timely mental health provision. Young people are not routinely provided with information to help them understand their health histories. The vast majority of young people live in suitable accommodation, but too many young people are not in employment, education or training.

Quality assurance arrangements and performance information for care leavers is under developed. This limits opportunities for senior leaders to scrutinise practice and inform necessary service improvements.

Arrangements for managing allegations against adults who work or volunteer with children require strengthening. Inefficient case management systems, delays in progressing cases and poor recording contribute to this.

Findings and evaluation of progress

The senior leadership team is determined to develop and improve services for young people leaving care. A review of the service for care leavers and the resulting action plan are assisting to clarify and embed practice standards and to develop the knowledge and skills of workers to better support care leavers.

The vast majority of young people have pathway plans, but their quality varies considerably. Pathway plans are not aspirational, and actions are not sufficiently clear about what is required, by whom and by when. They are not routinely updated when young people's circumstances change significantly. As a result, pathway plans are not an effective tool to fully assess young people's needs or to measure progress, and some young people experience delays in their needs being met. The local authority has very recently developed a new pathway planning tool kit, which includes a revised pathway plan. However, it is not yet in use.

Not all care leavers benefit from strong transition planning to enable them to access mental health services when they turn 18. In the absence of a clear mental health pathway, there are often delays in young people receiving appropriate interventions, leading to a deterioration in their circumstances, such as hospitalisation or custody. Care leavers are not provided with important information about their health histories and there is confusion and an absence of ownership regarding who is responsible for

providing this. This is concerning, particularly where some care leavers experience long-term health issues.

The quality and consistency of practice is variable across leaving care teams. Despite poor pathway plans, workers are able to articulate their interventions and most are responsive to young people's changing circumstances. The majority of care leavers benefit from trusting relationships with their workers and turn to them when in need. Risk is identified and responded to appropriately. Most young people benefit from regular, purposeful visits that are individualised to their needs and circumstances. Nevertheless, a small minority of young people experienced gaps in contact from their workers, during which their circumstances deteriorated.

The vast majority of young people live in accommodation that reflects their level of independence. However, while accommodation meets their physical and practical needs, not all young people have timely access to education or mental health services. Care leavers up to the age of 22 are benefiting from the recent introduction of council tax exemption.

The number of young people aged 19 to 21 in education, employment and training has fluctuated. It is now an improving picture at 51%, which is in line with the figure nationally. The figure is higher for 17- to 18-year-old care leavers at 61%, which is slightly less than national figure of 64%. Senior leaders recognise that this remains an area for improvement.

The local authority's 'essentials' training programme has been extended to include leaving care workers. Early evidence suggests that this is informing and improving workers' practice. Caseloads for most workers in the leaving care service are manageable and staff morale is good.

There are a good range of opportunities for care leavers to shape and influence service developments. For example, care leaving mentors provide consultation regarding service developments, and care leavers are involved in interviewing staff and have recently developed a new pathway plan. In addition, 16 care-experienced ambassadors are actively involved in service development and training staff to better understand the experiences of young people leaving care. Care leavers are well represented by the care leavers forum.

The local authority continues to experience challenges with recruiting and retaining a permanent workforce. This impacts on opportunities to establish and embed the required improvements in practice. The vacancy rate is currently 29% against a target of 10%. However, this has reduced from a high of 36% during the same period last year. Staff turnover has continued to reduce and currently sits at just 15% across children's services. While there has been less staff turnover in the leaving care service, a small number of care leavers have experienced frequent changes of worker.

The local authority auditing programme is well embedded, and there are now systems in place to ensure oversight and progression of actions in cases of most

concern. However, the number of audits completed in relation to care leavers is small, particularly for care leavers aged 21 to 25. This limits the local authority's understanding and oversight of the quality of practice and service provision to this vulnerable group.

The quality and range of management information used by senior leaders to understand and monitor care leavers' experiences are not yet sufficient to provide a detailed picture to understand the effectiveness of services.

Most staff receive regular supervision, which now provides more opportunities for reflection. However, supervision is not always sufficiently challenging, nor consistently effective in driving practice improvement or ensuring that actions are completed on time. As a result, care leavers can experience delays in accessing timely services, interventions and support, to the detriment of their health and well-being.

Arrangements to respond to allegations against adults who work or volunteer with children are underdeveloped and not yet sufficiently rigorous. Allegations management meetings are not always timely. The designated officer responds to and scrutinises referrals, but delays in convening some meetings impact on effective information-sharing and coordinated multi-agency planning and response. Action plans completed following meetings do not routinely include timescales, making it difficult to hold key partners to account for progression of tasks or achieve timely conclusion of cases.

The designated officer has provided an awareness-raising programme to a range of organisations on the allegations management process. However, it is difficult to determine the effectiveness of the service, as performance information is limited. While an electronic database has been commissioned, case records are currently held on paper files that are not readily accessible and the outcomes for individual cases are not routinely recorded. Available performance information is underdeveloped. This means that senior managers do not have all the information they need to satisfy themselves that the service is effective in responding to concerns regarding professionals who work with children.

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

Yours sincerely

Nicola Bennett
Her Majesty's Inspector
South West Region