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Dear Ms Tolley

Focused visit to Brent local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Brent local authority children's services on 13 and 14 November 2019. The inspectors were Tara Geere, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Máire Atherton, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for care leavers. They considered a range of evidence, which included discussions with care leavers, partner agencies, personal advisers, social workers and managers. Inspectors also reviewed local authority performance management and quality assurance information and care leavers' case records.

Overview

Care leavers continue to be a council-wide priority in Brent. A comprehensive local offer, together with strong corporate and political support and engagement with partners and the young people themselves, enables senior managers to focus on developing services to improve outcomes for care leavers. Since the last inspection in May 2018, senior managers have worked hard to stabilise the workforce within the care leavers' service. However, this has also led to some staff turnover, meaning that some care leavers have had several changes of worker.

Senior managers know their services well and are addressing the areas of practice where improvement is required. A decline in performance in the care leavers' service earlier in the year was identified by managers, and significant improvements have since been made. However, the quality of case recording, especially in relation to visits to care leavers, pathway plans and supervision, is not consistent. Senior managers have ensured that training and support have been provided to staff, to further improve practice in these areas.

The vast majority of care leavers live in suitable accommodation, supported by constructive relationships between children's social care services and housing.

'Staying put' arrangements are actively promoted and supported. There is a strong focus on ensuring that care leavers access education, employment and training, and most care leavers receive help in developing skills to promote their independence. As a result, the majority of care leavers receive effective support that helps most of them to achieve positive outcomes. A large number of care leavers in Brent are unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people, and they receive timely and sensitive consideration of their needs.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Consistency in the timeliness and quality of pathway plans.
- Case recording, including records of visits to care leavers, supervision and management oversight, and the management rationale for case closure.
- Audit arrangements to consider the quality of work with care leavers.
- Risk assessments to articulate measures to address and minimise risk.

Findings

- Senior leaders are committed to improving outcomes for care leavers. They seek regular feedback from the young people to inform service development, through a range of activities. Representatives of the 'care leavers in action' group routinely attend the corporate parenting committee to ensure that their views are considered. Feedback from the annual care leavers survey, which was developed with care leavers, Coram Voice and the University of Oxford, has resulted in recent workshops with a range of partners and care leavers, as well as an action plan to implement the learning.
- Feedback has also been used to influence service development, such as Safe Base, a service designed to promote resilience and emotional well-being. The service provides a variety of psychological support packages for care leavers up to 25 years old, so that they can 'feel supported and held in mind', through telephone, email and face-to-face sessions. Young people who spoke to inspectors were very positive about the support provided by this service.
- Strong partnerships with a range of partners, including housing and a co-located worker from the Department for Work and Pensions, help to ensure timely and flexible support and advice to young people. Senior managers are also developing new and innovative ways of working with partners to improve support. An accredited skills programme, group work and 'networks for life' are all ambitious projects aimed at building resilience and equipping children in care and care leavers for adult life. The local authority has also recently held a transitional safeguarding workshop, that was well attended by partners, to further develop pathways for transitions into adult services.

- Staff are aspirational for care leavers. The majority of young people who spoke to inspectors reported positively about the quality of support and advice offered to them. Staff make significant efforts to stay in touch with young people when they leave care, although recording on case files does not always reflect this work.
- Workers are able to articulate individual risks to care leavers, including those at risk of exploitation. However, risk assessment tools are not routinely used. Case recording does not consistently give clarity about any risk minimisation planning to address and minimise known risks to young people. When there are additional risks to care leavers, such as concerns about potential radicalisation, mental ill health, or young people in custody, young people are visited at a frequency determined by their age and circumstances. However, recording is not of a consistent quality to understand the purpose of the visit, or the discussions and actions to be taken as a result.
- There is a comprehensive quality assurance framework and a range of quality assurance activity, including a cross-departmental thematic audit process. However, care leavers are not routinely considered in all thematic audits. Senior managers took appropriate action during the focused visit to ensure that future audits will include a larger sample of care leavers, and that the impact of practice, as well as compliance, will be considered.
- The vast majority of care leavers benefit from access to a range of suitable housing options, including 'staying put' with their carers when appropriate. Effective work with housing and providers of semi-independent accommodation ensures that care leavers live in accommodation that meets their needs. As a result of the right level of preparation and support, there have been no tenancy breakdowns in the last three years.
- Care leavers benefit from being exempt from paying council tax, whether they live in or out of the authority, an initiative that was developed with full council and political support as part of the comprehensive local offer.
- Care leavers who are unaccompanied asylum seekers or refugees receive good support from their allocated workers, including help with understanding how to progress their applications to settle in the United Kingdom. In all cases seen by inspectors, these young people were in suitable accommodation and were helped to access education. Sensitive consideration is given to their personal histories and they are able to access help for their emotional and mental health needs.
- Social workers, personal advisers and staff from the virtual school are clearly focused on engaging young people in education, employment and training activities. Effective individual support is delivered through a range of initiatives. Close monitoring ensures that care leavers who are, or who are at risk of being, not in education, employment or training, are quickly identified and supported. Currently, 10 young people benefit from apprenticeships, either directly within the

local authority or through its commissioning arrangements. Senior managers are working with partners to increase the number of apprenticeships available. Care leavers in higher education receive timely and effective financial, practical and emotional support to help them to complete their studies.

- Care leavers are provided with a varied range of social and enrichment opportunities, which they appreciate and value. Young people speak highly of all of the activities on offer, such as the weekly football sessions and a monthly hub for care leavers, as well as other activities such as residential trips.
- The emotional and physical health needs of care leavers are well considered and well met. Health assessments are conducted regularly and are of good quality. However, care leavers who spoke to inspectors said that they do not consistently receive their health histories, which limits their ability to make informed decisions about their future healthcare. Care leavers are currently working with staff to develop an electronic app that will enable them to have access to their records.
- The majority of pathway plans are completed collaboratively with care leavers. This means that most care leavers are involved with and participate in planning for their futures. However, pathway plans vary in quality. Some pathway plans are not thorough enough, and most plans are not updated after significant changes to young people's circumstances. Actions in plans are not always specific or time bounded. As a result, it is hard to see whether actions are progressed in a timely way. Records do not always show whether care leavers have received a copy of their plan, or whether any changes have been made to reflect their views. Plans do not routinely contain a record of management authorisation.
- Management oversight and supervision vary in quality. Records do not always demonstrate consistent examples of reflective, analytical supervision and management oversight. Some supervision records do not provide sufficient clarity about the specific actions that staff need to complete, and by when, in order to improve outcomes for care leavers.
- Staff have access to a wide range of induction and training opportunities. They report that they are supported and encouraged to engage in training and development events. These events provide good opportunities to reflect and focus on practice improvement with care leavers.

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

Yours sincerely

Tara Geere
Her Majesty's Inspector