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Mr Mike Bowden
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Dear Mr Bowden

Focused visit to Bath and North East Somerset Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Bath and North East Somerset (B&NES) children's services on 26 and 27 November 2019. The inspectors were Steve Lowe and Donna Marriott, Her Majesty's Inspectors.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for care leavers. Specifically, they considered the quality and timeliness of needs assessments, pathway plans, and the response to risk. Inspectors also looked at arrangements to ensure that suitable, safe accommodation is provided for care leavers, and the extent to which they receive clear and effective support into education, employment and training.

Overview

Senior leaders have secured some improvements for care leavers in response to the areas for development identified in the last inspection of this service in 2017. However, progress in some areas has been slow. Young people receive practical and emotional support from social workers and personal advisers who know them well. Importantly, the identification and response to risk has improved. Young people are now visited in accordance with their needs. They are very clear about their rights and entitlements, and the local offer results in tangible benefits for them.

Some improvements are recent and not fully embedded in practice. The application of the risk assessment tool is inconsistent and needs assessments are not always completed or updated. The quality of pathway plans has improved, but they are not always completed in a timely way. The review of pathway plans is not always stringent.

Senior leaders have invested in improvements to performance data and quality assurance, including the case auditing process. These are very recent and as yet lack the rigour necessary to drive change and deliver a wholly accurate assessment of performance.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The updating of assessments of care leavers to reflect their current needs.
- The timeliness and review of pathway plans so that professionals and young people are clear about what needs to be achieved by when, incorporating responses to risk.
- Managers' use of performance information and quality assurance processes.

Findings

- There is a clear corporate and political commitment to improving the service, which is informed by the views and experiences of young people. Leaders have worked purposefully to respond to the areas for development identified at the last inspection. Although progress has been made, this is not as advanced in some areas as leaders thought. Some progress has been slow, particularly in delivering improvements in performance information and the coordination of young people's assessments and plans.
- The quality and timeliness of intervention have improved. Young people appreciate the level of passion and dedication displayed by personal advisers and social workers. Young people are seen, and seen alone, in a timely way by workers who know them well. When young people need additional support, including when they are in custody, personal advisers ensure that they are seen more frequently.
- Arrangements to keep in touch with care leavers are successful. Personal advisers are sensitive to the balance of support and independence that young people need as they move into adulthood. When young people return to the service for support, this is offered quickly and equitably. For a very small number of young people who are reluctant to stay in touch, personal advisers could show more tenacity in establishing contact with them.
- Social workers and personal advisers have started to use a risk management tool in recent months that supports them to identify risks to young people, including exploitation, criminality and substance use. The level and escalation of risk is more clearly articulated in records and in case discussions. Although risks are now better identified, there is more work to do to ensure that these are routinely integrated in pathway plans.
- Young people are supported and encouraged to become independent at a time when they are ready. Staying put with foster carers and supported living

arrangements are used appropriately. The drop-in facility that has recently been introduced has been welcomed by young people. Senior leaders are aware that extending its availability would give additional support to those young people who live independently.

- Young people's physical and emotional health are well catered for by commissioned and community-based resources. Young people access the emotional support that they need through the services that they are most comfortable with. Health histories are available to young people as they approach 18, but there is a lack of clarity on where they can go to get additional copies if the original is misplaced.
- The vast majority of care leavers live in suitable accommodation. The oversight of commissioned accommodation, including unregulated provision, is rigorous and results in additional support to keep young people safe. Arrangements to risk assess young people who are using temporary accommodation provided by the housing department needs to be strengthened.
- There has been a significant increase in the number of care leavers who are not in education, employment or training. Although broadly in line with performance with the rest of England, this had been an area of strength at the time of the last inspection. Senior leaders have responded to this issue with additional specialist workers, who are starting to have a positive impact through their individual work with young people. Conversely, there are a significant number of young people who are successfully supported in higher education.
- Needs assessments in preparation for young people leaving care are not always completed in a timely way, and they vary in quality. In addition, assessments are not routinely updated when young people's circumstances change. The cycle of assessment, planning and review is not as sharp as it needs to be to support effective case management.
- Personal advisers are committed to involving young people in the creation of their pathway plans. The recently revised format of the pathway plan captures the views of young people in a meaningful way, and there is an improvement in their overall quality. However, the completion of plans is not always timely. Coupled with the inconsistencies in the quality of assessments, this means that young people and those involved with them are not always clear about the actions that are needed and who is responsible for implementing change.
- Ensuring that young people know their rights and receive their entitlements is of great importance to staff at all levels of the local authority. The local offer is comprehensive, accessible and ambitious and its impact is tangible, from information and advice through to financial support, council tax exemptions and bursaries.

- There has been a steady increase in the number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in B&NES. In response, a dedicated worker has been employed and has made impressive progress in terms of consolidating the offer to these children. The coordination of legal and cultural support is much improved, and triple planning for the possibility of children being returned to their country of birth is becoming more embedded.
- Senior leaders have a strong track record of listening to children and young people. The views of young people are gathered routinely and feed directly into the improvement of services.
- There is some variability in the frequency and quality of frontline supervision. Recording does not always capture the quality of reflective discussion that is described by workers. All of the staff have ready access to supportive managers who know the young people well.
- Staff morale is high, and staff are proud to work for B&NES. The local training offer is comprehensive and contemporary. Staff are given opportunities to progress and the introduction of the senior personal adviser post has added to the options available for increased responsibility.
- At a corporate level, the local authority has responded to weaknesses in performance reporting by introducing a live reporting tool and a centralised approach to data analysis. This has been slow in its execution and has not yet been rolled out to all levels of management. Managers are using a hybrid of electronic and manual records while the new system is rolled out across the authority. There remain anomalies between the different systems that require manual checking.
- Quality assurance through case auditing is an area for further improvement. The quality of auditing, particularly the identification of outstanding actions for staff, is variable, and the recent introduction of a tracker for compliance is undermined because of this. The focused visit has reinforced for senior leaders that more rigour and urgency is required in quality assuring practice.

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

Yours sincerely

Steve Lowe
Her Majesty's Inspector