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Dear Tim

Monitoring visit to Newham children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Newham children's services on 14 and 15 September 2021. This was the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in March 2019. Her Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Andy Whippey and Sarah Canto.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- care planning for children in care
- care planning for care leavers
- the quality of provision for care leavers.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. The visit was conducted entirely on site with adherence to relevant COVID-19 (coronavirus) safety measures. Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, supervision records, case management records, performance data, audits and progress reports. In addition, inspectors spoke to a range of staff, including managers, partners and social workers. Inspectors also spoke to several children and foster carers.

Headline findings

Services for children in care and care leavers in Newham are improving. Tangible and visible signs of improvements in care planning are evident. The voices of children in decisions made for their future are increasingly discernible and permanence planning has been given greater impetus. This has been achieved against a context of the severe and ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in

Newham. There is still more work to do to ensure that children and young people's needs are consistently met. Leaders have a clear understanding of the areas where improvement is necessary and have robust and realistic plans to address them.

Findings and evaluation of progress

There is a small number of children for whom the local authority has planned for adoption, but are not yet matched with adopters. For these children, the local authority is actively tracking permanence, with any delays in the vast majority of cases due to court proceedings. Most children who move into adoptive homes do not have to wait long for an adoption order to be applied for.

Early permanence planning for children is clearly improving, including the consideration of foster-to-adopt arrangements where these best meet children's needs. Communication with the regional adoption agency is purposeful and promotes joint effective planning.

There are some delays in securing permanence for some children for whom the plan is long-term fostering. Recent work has shown a greater drive towards achieving permanence in most, but not all cases. There is evidence of increased permanence planning meetings but there is still too much inconsistency in terms of their frequency and quality. In some instances, there is a lack of clear, decisive actions. These actions are also not always reviewed effectively to identify and challenge any delay. The permanence tracking panel is not providing sufficient oversight and challenge of children's journeys towards permanence.

There has been a concerted effort towards better permanence planning for adolescent children where these children are the subject of voluntary care arrangements. Clear progress has been made in the tracking and securing of permanence for most children in this cohort.

The provision of life history work for children to help them understand their journeys into and through care is not consistent. The local authority is aware that it has more to do to ensure that such work is provided to all children in a timely manner. Some foster carers are collating information and photos to help children look back on their experiences while in care, but this is not happening for all children.

Care plans are detailed, with a good focus on the needs of children, but for some children, these are not always updated in a timely manner to reflect all aspects of the current plan. This is being addressed through a new process designed to ensure that children in care have an updated assessment of need.

There is some variability in the quality of children in care reviews, but the majority are sensitively written to children, including explaining reasons for decisions around difficult issues such as contact with family members. Children are encouraged to contribute actively to their reviews, but advocacy is not always sufficiently

considered for children who are, for whatever reason, not directly engaging with their reviews.

Independent reviewing officers (IROs) are becoming more active in planning for children. Between reviews, they are having conversations with children and reviewing progress against children's plans. There is evidence of IRO challenge in respect of any delays in permanency planning, but this is not consistently effective in all cases.

Children's health needs are well considered, and health assessments are detailed and thorough. The local authority knows it has more to do in conjunction with health partners to ensure the timely completion of health assessments and dental checks.

Foster carers said that they feel supported and supervised by their own social workers. In a small minority of cases, some frustration was expressed about a lack of timely responses or involvement from children's social workers.

Overall, pathway plans for care leavers are showing improvement. There is still variability, but most are now showing positive signs of care leavers' involvement in their completion. There is better articulation of their current circumstances and hopes for the future. While needs and aspirations are mostly well identified, how these needs are to be met is not always clear or decisive.

Risk assessments to help identify potential vulnerabilities or risks to care leavers are now routinely completed. Most show positive involvement of care leavers in their completion. Risks are well identified; however, a minority are not always reviewed when needs and/or risks escalate and need to be more specific as to the measures needed to reduce risk.

Personal Advisers (PAs) are being allocated to care leavers before their 18th birthday. The work undertaken in some cases is insufficient to ensure effective information-sharing and the building of relationships prior to care leavers moving into the careleaver service.

PAs have a genuine interest in and commitment to young people and seek to build positive relationships with them. However, some visits to care leavers are not well recorded and records do not give clarity as to the purpose of the visit, a sense of the work undertaken or any actions which need to be undertaken as a result.

The vast majority of care leavers are in suitable accommodation consistent with their needs. The local authority has a strong commitment to staying-put arrangements, with some care leavers remaining living with their foster families into their mid 20s.

The recent appointment of not in education, employment or training workers providing direct support to care leavers, alongside a new education, employment or training data tracking and monitoring worker, is starting to make a positive difference to young people being able to access opportunities for the future.

There has been a concentrated multi-agency effort to ensure that all care leavers have health summaries which will be stored securely for them. Nearly all young people who have consented for this to happen have these summaries, which include their complete health history from birth to 18.

The local authority, in partnership with health professionals, has responded positively after identifying a gap in provision to support the emotional health and well-being of care leavers. A new health post has been created to provide direct emotional support to young people. This role is also responsible for skilling up professionals in emotional health and supporting effective working relationships between adult mental health and children's social care.

The achievements of care leavers are not always celebrated on an individual level, with achievements such as getting a job or graduating with a degree not being fully recognised.

Inspectors spoke to a selection of children and young people. Most, but not all, young people have constructive relationships with their social workers or personal advisers and feel well supported. They are encouraged to have hobbies and interests. Young people have been given guidance and help to access further education, training or work in a variety of ways. Children and young people spoken to were all living in suitable homes that they felt met their needs. They have had their entitlements explained to them carefully but some raised issues about financial challenges, including for those who attend higher education.

Senior managers are committed to undertaking audits to evaluate the quality of practice and these are improving. They now provide managers with an accurate assessment of the quality of practice to assist staff with their learning and development. Some audits are insufficiently focused on the impact of practice on the experiences and progress of children and lack clarity about the actions that are necessary to enhance children's well-being.

The quality of supervision is improving. However, while social workers receive regular supervision, in some examples the recording of actions lacks clarity. There is some variability in the extent to which managers routinely analyse practice to ensure that the work is making a difference to the lives of children in care and care leavers.

Social worker caseloads are generally at a level that enables them to undertake purposeful work with children. Senior managers are aware of rising caseload numbers in the care leaver service and are taking positive steps to address this. Recently, there has been significant permanent recruitment activity which is now showing some signs of progress.

A more stable, permanent management team has helped staff to understand the organisation's vision and clear expectations in relation to practice standards. Staff

said that they find senior managers approachable and in touch with their day-to-day work. They have regular opportunities to feed back their views to help improve service delivery. Senior managers have taken opportunities to meet with children, young people and staff, for example at a summer barbecue, and this has enabled relationships to build and children and young people to express their views in a relaxed environment.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Andy Whippey
Her Majesty's Inspector