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Dear Deborah

Monitoring visit of Wirral children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Wirral children's services on 30 and 31 August 2017. The visit was the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in July 2016. The inspectors were Susan Myers HMI, and Shabana Abasi HMI.

The local authority is making some progress in improving services for its children and young people.

Areas covered by the visit

During this visit, inspectors focused on the progress made in improving support to care leavers. Additionally, inspectors reviewed the effectiveness of independent reviewing officers (IROs) and the quality and impact of auditing processes. The visit considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, supervision files and notes, action plans and reports. In addition, inspectors met with and spoke to several care leavers and a range of staff, including managers, social workers and other practitioners.

Overview

This visit found that some progress has been made in a number of areas reviewed during the monitoring visit. The new care leavers' service, which has been established since the time of the inspection, has reinvigorated this area of work. It is still early days, and most of the progress has been made since March. However, there is a real sense of energy and enthusiasm in managers and personal advisers (PAs), who are keen and committed to improve services to care leavers. The local authority has invested resources in the service, which has led to an increase of 13 additional PAs since the time of the inspection a year ago, when there were only three. The total number of PAs now is 16. This increased capacity has resulted in reduced caseloads, which give staff the time to get to know young people better and

to support them to achieve their goals. The quality of pathway plans continues to be an area for improvement.

At the time of the inspection, IRO caseloads were too high, and this limited IROs' capacity to visit children regularly enough and to raise and escalate shortfalls in practice effectively. They now have an improved footprint on case notes and more influence on the progression of children's plans. Improved systems and processes for raising and tracking concerns have resulted in improved timeliness in social workers responding to escalations. However, IROs continue to feel that their roles are not fully understood by some social workers and team managers. Having a named IRO linked to each team is gradually improving this.

A wide range of managers are involved in completing audits. This results in managers developing auditing skills across the service, spreading learning and promoting good practice. Managers recognise that they need to further develop their auditing skills and become more consistent as a group. They are growing in confidence and feel that the approach is positive. They are learning from each other and meet regularly to benchmark their work. Following audit cycles, managers provide learning sessions to staff on findings and themes and provide action points for staff.

Findings and evaluation of progress

At the time of the inspection in 2016, the local authority had lost touch with many care leavers. There was no dedicated care leavers' service or a specific place for care leavers to meet with each other and with their PAs. Determined effort to correct this has resulted in the service being in contact with all care leavers and the vast majority of care leavers now having regular contact with the team. PAs are using a range of methods effectively to keep in touch with care leavers, including visits, texts and social media. In the very small number of cases where care leavers have not been in touch, there is evidence of tenacious attempts by workers to re-establish contact. This work is being enabled by the recent opening of a daily drop-in for care leavers, staffed by PAs who offer practical help, advice and emotional support for young people.

At the time of the full inspection, children were not provided with support from a PA until after their 18th birthdays. Now all children are allocated a PA to work alongside their social worker when they are 16. This gives children the opportunity to gradually get to know and build trust with their PA before their case is transferred. When PAs are worried about young people, effective management oversight is ensuring that care leavers who are vulnerable or at risk are identified and supported.

A 'traffic-light' RAG rating is now given to all care leavers, and this is regularly reviewed in supervision. If a young person is rated as red, a multi-agency meeting is convened within five days to discuss and share information and develop a plan of action and support. This is a recent development but is already improving timeliness

in the coordination of services. Care leavers said that they have good relationships with their PAs, who go out of their way to help them.

All care leavers have a pathway plan. However, these are still of variable quality. Plans are not regularly updated to reflect significant changes, for example when young people leave staying-put placements to live with a partner or become a parent. The personal voice and thoughts of children do not come through strongly in plans. Identity, culture and diversity are not well considered, and hopes and aspirations are not explored. In many cases, pathway plans are a list of tasks for young people to complete. There is a lack of future and contingency planning. For example, when young people make decisions to leave placements, to return to their parents or to live with friends, this has not always been considered and prepared for in plans. Care leavers said that they are involved in creating plans but feel that they could be more dynamic and personal.

Care leavers who have stayed put with their foster carers beyond their 18th birthdays told inspectors how much they have benefited from these arrangements. They feel well supported and cared for by carers who know them well. Flexible financial packages are also supporting many young people appropriately. Inspectors saw creative ways of supporting young people to start their own businesses, become apprentices, work for the local authority or take up education and training.

Since the inspection in 2016, two dedicated nurses have been appointed to support and advise care leavers on staying healthy and to promote access to health services. Care leavers who have used counselling, drug and alcohol support and mental health services said that these have helped them and made a positive difference, but that they had to wait too long for the service. Most care leavers have not had their health histories shared with them. The local authority has appropriate plans in place to address this.

The capacity within the IRO service has been strengthened through the recruitment of additional staff. This has allowed caseloads to be reduced from an average of between 90 and 110, at the time of the inspection, to between 75 and 78. This is enabling IROs to provide a more effective service, for example visiting children prior to reviews to gain their views and to monitor and track cases between reviews. There is evidence of the active involvement of IROs in most of the cases seen during the monitoring visit. Case files also evidence appropriate liaison with other professionals, such as children's guardians and the legal team.

The appointment of a permanent IRO manager has provided a clear structure and focus to the safeguarding unit. IROs feel well supported, particularly in the escalations of challenges. The service understands the areas in need of development and ways in which the service can be strengthened further. Inspectors found the recent introduction of peer file audits to be a positive development for IROs. Through sharing learning and identifying themes, they ensure that quality assurance of performance is focused on practice issues as well as internal performance standards.

Implementation of the new dispute resolution procedures has resulted in IROs having a much better understanding of escalation criteria. Escalations seen were appropriate and raised concerns in relation to process and social work practice, such as the appropriateness of orders being sought by the local authority, lack of risk management planning, drift in children's plans or delay in tasks being completed. Performance data is available and is used regularly by the manager to monitor and track the progress of any issues raised by IROs. There continue to be some cases where responses to challenges and escalations are not sufficiently recorded in the case files.

When there is a significant change in a case, such as a new social worker or team manager, or a change in a child's circumstances, this is not always shared with the safeguarding unit. This means that IROs do not always know about issues that could influence the progress of children's plans.

Audits are identifying many of the shortfalls in practice, but not all. Auditors are routinely identifying gaps in genograms and chronologies and noting when supervision sessions have not taken place. These are, in the main, process or compliance issues. It is positive that some audits are starting to identify issues such as a lack of direct work with children or plans that are too focused on adults. This demonstrates a move from ensuring compliance to assurance of quality practice.

In audits, there continue to be inconsistencies and examples of the written text not matching the judgement. For example, in one audit the 'help provided and impact' section is graded as 'good' by the auditor, but there was insufficient evidence to support this judgement. In this case, the moderator reduced the grade appropriately. However, the moderation process is not yet fully effective as, in another case, the moderator upgraded a case despite insufficient evidence to support the inflated judgement.

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

Yours sincerely

Susan Myers
Her Majesty's Inspector