

13 June 2017

Mr Ade Adetosoye
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Dear Mr Adetosoye

Third monitoring visit to Bromley's local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Bromley children's services on 9 and 10 May 2017. The visit is the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate for overall effectiveness in June 2016. The inspectors were Marcie Taylor HMI and Alison Smale HMI.

The local authority is making steady progress in improving services for children looked after and care leavers. Within the cases reviewed on this visit, no inadequate practice was seen and some aspects of good practice were identified.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of the visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the areas of children looked after and care leavers, including:

- the quality and impact of social work interventions for children looked after
- decision making and planning in relation to permanence for children looked after
- the quality and effectiveness of support to care leavers, including suitable accommodation
- the quality and timeliness of management oversight and decision making, including senior management line of sight of front line practice; the focus on the child in the quality of recording and social work capacity

The visit considered a broad range of evidence, including electronic case records, other supporting documentation and discussions with a range of staff including, managers, social workers and other practitioners. Inspectors spoke to a number of parents of children looked after.

Overview

Within the cases considered there is improvement in practice for children looked after and care leavers. Inspectors did not see any inadequate practice, and in some cases, where workers know the children well, positive relationships are helping children to do well in their placements. There is evidence of increased active management oversight on case records and workers report that they have frequent opportunities to discuss cases and receive regular supervision. The senior management team, all of whom are in permanent positions, are confident in their understanding of the quality of social work practice and focus training and support to social workers in the areas for improvement, identified in regular audits. Most care leavers are in accommodation suitable to their needs, and overall, support is more pro-active and effective.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Based on the evidence gathered during this visit, there is momentum in establishing and embedding core standards and processes. This is leading to improved practice and improved experiences for children looked after and care leavers. The local authority is making good progress in implementing actions in the improvement plan for children looked after and care leavers.

Senior managers have established routine audit activity that is effective in identifying key areas for improved practice. Oversight of front line practice and routine monitoring of progress ensures that the local authority understands the impact of work with children and families in Bromley. 'Live' case audits, undertaken alongside workers, is beginning to help them to reflect on their practice and be clear about how their interventions are helping children and what can be done to further improve their experiences in care. The implementation of 'practice week' in April 2017 presented a range of opportunities for senior leaders and elected members, including the leader of the council, to directly observe practice and speak to parents, carers, and young people to understand the impact of the services they receive. This has increased effective oversight of social work practice. Ongoing review of the quarterly practice development programme ensures that training is now targeting priority areas for improvement as identified in audit activity.

Social workers are encouraged about the changes made in Bromley and report that senior leaders are accessible and approachable. The co-location of heads of service alongside social work teams is beneficial in this respect. Opportunities for staff to meet directly with the Executive Director for children's services and other very senior managers through the newly established social work advisory group and monthly staff surgery is enabling the more effective engagement of staff in the improvement journey. Staff are directly contributing ideas to improve practice, for example, the development of a resource directory to highlight the range of supports available, including multi-agency services, to support children and families in Bromley.

Morale of workers is high; all spoken to by inspectors are clear about the practice standards expected of them. They are confident about the integrity of the new senior leadership team who provide a clear and aspirational vision for children services in Bromley. In nearly all cases seen on this visit, the social workers, independent reviewing officers, and personal advisors, demonstrate they know the young people well. Reduced caseloads has resulted in increased capacity to enable social workers to establish positive and effective relationships that helps children to feel secure in their placements.

The breadth and effectiveness of direct work is variable and in some cases is limited to descriptions and observations of children during home visits. However, inspectors saw in two of the tracked cases, positive relationships with hard to engage young people that has resulted in effective practice in reducing risky behaviours. This includes a high level of support provided to two young people in residential placements out of borough. Work to help children looked after understand their life stories is at an early stage, and is not yet sufficiently embedded as part of routine direct work. In general, electronic case records do not consistently capture the quality and positive impact of direct work undertaken with children looked after.

Assessments and plans, including placement plans for children looked after and care leavers, are not always routinely updated to reflect children's changing circumstances. This makes it difficult in some cases, to get a real time understanding of a child needs and lived experience. This includes the experience of care leavers, where an up to date assessment is crucial to understand risk in order to provide proportionate and effective support for young people living in semi-independent living arrangements.

The local authority are confident that all care leavers are in appropriate accommodation. A newly appointed placement officer is improving partnership working with both the housing and the commissioning team. A range of supported accommodation options are now in place that includes support and advice. A new multi-agency panel will take forward plans to develop a range of independent living options for care leavers aged over 18 years. Inspectors saw effective use of 'staying put' arrangements that provide placement stability and continuity of care for 17 young people moving into adulthood. Pathway plans, completed on a six monthly basis, cover the core domains of a young person's needs and risks, and improved multi-agency work, includes detailed health assessments. However, work that helps them understand their full health histories is at a very early stage.

Composition of the permanence and planning panel has been extended to include a legal advisor and managers from the fostering and adoption service. This is providing a clear process for managers to review and monitor the quality of work and decision-making for children and young people. There are more timely decisions for issuing legal proceedings in order to secure permanent plans for children through adoption or special guardianship arrangements and to secure long-term security for children in

foster care. There has also been increased placement stability and improvements in children's health and educational outcomes.

Management oversight of work is evident on case records seen and workers report that they have regular supervision and opportunities to discuss casework. The quality of recorded sessions varies and in most cases seen, the monitoring of actions and evidence of progression is limited. Better examples included detailed timely actions, monitored over a period, leading to clear progress following work with children. All social workers reported that caseload numbers are reducing and this is starting to create capacity to enable them to engage positively with young people. It further supports them to undertake and complete work within agreed timescales. This was evident on cases where children looked after in out of borough placements receive visits more frequently than the statutory minimum. This has led to more positive relationships and effective support.

Overall, this visit found continuing improvements in practice for children looked after and care leavers. Increased capacity at social work and managerial level aligned to the more active engagement of partners is a key contributor to this progress. This is leading to more timely and positive experiences for children looked after and care leavers. Steady and continued progress in the implementation of the local authority's action plan is addressing most of the deficits identified during the inspection in June 2016 for this group of children and young people.

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

Yours sincerely

Marcie Taylor
Her Majesty's Inspector