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Mr Andy Couldrick
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Dear Mr Couldrick

Monitoring visit of Birmingham's children's' services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Birmingham children's services on 15 and 16 May 2018. The visit was the fifth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged to be inadequate in November 2016. The inspectors were Peter McEntee, HMI, and Andrew Waugh, HMI.

The local authority is continuing to make progress in relation to services for young people leaving care. However, the stability of placements for children living in long-term fostering arrangements is not as secure as it could be. This is because too many children have multiple contact arrangements with extended family members that have not been appropriately assessed or evaluated. Management oversight, including that of independent reviewing officers, has not been effective in recognising these issues and challenging them.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in services to young people leaving care at 18 years. Areas of particular focus included whether young people were being supported by personal advisers and had appropriate access to services, including accommodation, education, employment and training and health. Inspectors also considered the cohort of children who have been in care for at least two years. In particular, the quality and stability of their placements and the long-term plans to secure their permanence were evaluated. Also considered was whether the voice of children and young people was listened to and taken into account.

A range of evidence was considered during the visit, including electronic case records, supervision files and notes and other information provided by staff and

managers. We had discussions with social workers, personal advisers and a number of young people in the Birmingham leaving care forum.

Overview

There has been progress since the last inspection in services for care leavers. Young people leaving care are all allocated a personal adviser and there has been further investment made in establishing a fifth 18+ leaving care team to support unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people. There is a continuing but not yet effective focus on reducing the numbers of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET). A significant number of young people benefit from staying put arrangements with former foster carers and also continuing support while completing higher education. Care leavers who need mental health support are benefiting from a new therapeutic care leavers support service (TESS) team. A new pathway plan template is enabling young people's views and aspirations to be better captured, although further work is required to ensure that all pathway plans are completed on a timely basis. Despite a policy that personal education plans will be undertaken post-18, none were seen on this visit and more work is required to ensure that staff understand the benefits of continuing this practice.

Children who have been in the care of Birmingham for two years or more are benefiting from, in almost all cases seen, stable, long-term living arrangements. Comprehensive plans are in place and are reviewed regularly. Contact with birth family is promoted, but in too many cases where multiple arrangements for contact are made with extended family members, there is a potential of increased instability and a greater risk of placement breakdown. These arrangements have not been adequately evaluated or overseen by managers and independent reviewing officers (IROs). In some cases, such contact arrangements are acting as a disincentive to foster parents further securing children's futures through applying for special guardianship orders (SGO). In some instances, children are saying they did not want this level of contact and their views are not being taken into account. Senior managers continue to be aware that further work needs to be done to ensure that services for children are of a standard at which their outcomes are consistently good.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Since the last inspection, Birmingham Children's Trust has made further progress in improving the quality of its services for young people leaving care. Young people leaving care are all allocated a personal adviser (PA) from the age of 18. Personal advisers know their young people well. They have an understanding of how young people are living and the issues they face. Advisers are aware of, and ensure young people have access to their, entitlements, a range of services and other agency support available. This includes mental health support and counselling through a new TESS leaving care team.

A new pathway plan format introduced this year is a significant improvement on the previous format. Pathway plans seen and in which the young person has co-operated are detailed, and good use is made of the strengthening families model to identify issues where progress needs to be made. The voice of young people and their aspirations are readily apparent. Almost all young people have pathway plans updated every six months, although in a few instances this is not happening on a timely basis. Plans are written in the first person and use language that a young person can easily understand.

Personal education plans (PEPs) are not routinely completed after young people reach 18. Although this is not a requirement, it is good practice to undertake PEPs if young people remain in or enter education at 18-plus. Current practice in Birmingham Children's Trust is to offer a PEP, but no examples were seen where young people were in education at 18 and beyond.

There is an appropriate focus on young people who are NEET. Overall numbers of NEET show a small reduction since the last full inspection. The trust reports that a significant percentage, 37%, of this cohort have a significant barrier to accessing education, employment or training (EET) because of parental status, mental health issues or special needs. The creation of a specialist post to focus and oversee EET is ensuring that all NEET cases are being tracked and followed up through termly meetings with allocated personal advisers, but this has yet to further reduce numbers of NEET. The number of care leavers currently in apprenticeships is now 17 and higher than at the last inspection. The practice of 'taster' days for young people at a variety of employment venues has been successful: 105 young people in the 18–21 cohort are attending higher education at L4 plus, university and postgraduate level.

The vast majority (95%) of young people are living in appropriate accommodation and benefit from priority in public housing allocation. They also receive appropriate financial support and the service has ensured support payments continue to be made while claims for universal credit are being processed. Good levels of liaison with other local authorities works effectively when young people experience accommodation difficulties. Eighty-eight young people are currently benefiting from staying put arrangements.

Good efforts are made to keep in contact with young people, despite this being challenging in some cases. Young people are seen regularly and, between visits, personal advisers maintain a high level of contact by way of texts and phone calls.

There are a wide range of corporate forums engaging with young people and those young people spoken to state that they felt 'genuinely listened to'. For instance, the care leavers' forum is well established and well attended. Additionally, the rights and participation service offers effective support and enables care leavers to challenge poor service delivery.

Children staying in care in Birmingham for two or more years are living in stable, long-term arrangements. These placements have, in most instances, been formally matched and the long-term plan formally approved. Many children have had the positive experience of a single social worker and IRO since their long-term plan was finalised.

Reviews are held regularly, although there was little evidence of young people attending reviews. In some cases, IROs had met young people in placement to ascertain their views, but these meetings were often only the week before the review. In many cases, reviews are being held in schools, despite these being potentially inappropriate venues because of the risk of stigmatisation. In some cases, it was stated by social workers that this was to ensure attendance of school staff. A reluctance by school staff to attend reviews otherwise, as reported in previous monitoring visits, indicates that they have yet to understand their central role as partners in these meetings and as corporate parents.

Social workers visit children regularly in accordance with statutory requirements and sometimes more frequently. Social workers know their children well and often develop positive relationships with them. Life-story books are in most cases underway or already completed. However, they are not always written in a child's language and it is not always clear how involved a child is in the book's creation.

Supervision of staff is, in the vast majority of cases, regular, with managers having a clear oversight of case issues by using the strengthening families approach. Where there are performance issues, these have been identified and are being addressed appropriately. Social workers have reasonable caseloads of between 14 and 17. This is a mixture of cases in proceedings and those where young people are in long-term placements. Some staff report difficulties in managing the requirements of both, with long-term 'stable' cases being adversely impacted as a result. These longer term cases are not being seen with the same priority and focus on practice.

Despite plans being in place and being reviewed regularly, there is a lack of consideration of the potential long-term impact of high levels of contact arrangements for children and how this might affect the future stability of placements. Contact arrangements of up to 12 times a year for multiple family members were evident in many cases and in some for those who had harmed the child. In some cases, this level of contact had been recorded as having a detrimental

impact on young people, but these arrangements were not subject to rigorous review or challenge. Lack of recognition and action by managers and IROs of this issue means that the risk of placement breakdown is higher than it should be. This lack of focus has meant that, in a number of cases, foster carers have been reluctant to consider the further securing of a child's future through an application for SGO. Also, in some cases there has been no consideration by the social worker, manager or IRO of the benefits of an SGO, even when children have been in placement for several years. This means that opportunities to strengthen a child's legal security and bonds with their carers are being missed.

Audits continue to focus on compliance, with little evidence of enquiry into qualitative issues. This means that auditors are in some cases missing key practice issues, which may affect future outcomes for young people. As a result, feedback to social work staff on their practice is limited and can inhibit their ability to understand practice deficits and learn as a result. The trust has indicated that a new audit format is to be introduced in June this year, and this will have a focus on qualitative practice.

The local authority has demonstrated that it has made some further improvements to the quality of social work practice since the last inspection. However, where children in care have long-term plans, there is a risk that a lack of focus on ensuring long-term security will result in instability in the future and poorer outcomes as a result. Further work remains to be done to ensure that practice is consistently good and that the best outcomes for all children are achieved on a timely and consistent basis.

I would like to thank all the staff who contributed to our visit and their positive engagement with the process. I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Peter McEntee
Her Majesty's Inspector