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Dear Ms Olsson

Focused visit to Devon county council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Devon county council children's services on 12 and 13 September 2018. The inspectors were Emmy Tomsett, HMI, and Diane Partridge, HMI.

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

Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including discussions with care leavers, social workers and managers, and meetings with the virtual head and several education and health partners. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

Overview

Following a period of changes to the organisational structure and senior management turnover, the local authority has recently made purposeful and well-targeted progress in improving services for its care leavers. Corporate parenting is now a key strength in Devon, and leaders have also ensured that this has been embraced by partner agencies. Senior leaders have good awareness of the key

strengths and weaknesses in the service. Improvement measures, implemented and monitored across the service, are now contributing to better outcomes for care leavers in most aspects of their lives. While the quality of practice in most areas has started to improve the overall pace of change and improvement following the last inspection, within the care leavers service it has been slow. Senior leaders recognise the need to increase the momentum of improvement so that good-quality practice is routinely delivered in Devon.

The chief officer and her team acknowledge that the service historically lacked a culture of challenge and professional accountability, and they are working to embed the use of performance information and quality assurance processes. Senior leaders have invested in an interactive and user-friendly performance information tool that can be accessed by all practitioners, in order to scrutinise performance across the service.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Managers' use of performance information and quality assurance processes.
- The quality and timeliness of case recording and pathway planning for young people.
- The quality and timeliness of return home interviews when young people go missing.
- The range of training for personal advisers and social workers, specifically in relation to working with care leavers.
- The updating of assessments of care leavers to reflect their current needs and to inform well targeted plans for young people effectively.

Findings

- Social workers and personal advisers are highly committed to supporting care leavers, and their passion and dedication are greatly appreciated by young people. Care leavers are seen in a timely way and seen alone by social workers and personal advisers who know them well. However, while the individual wishes and feelings of the young person are well articulated by staff, there is too much variability in how effectively this information is translated into written records.
- Arrangements to keep in touch with care leavers have significantly improved since the last inspection, and Devon is now in touch with 92% of its care leavers. Social workers and personal advisers demonstrate sustained and persistent attempts to engage young people and to monitor effectively their safety and welfare. Where care leavers do not wish to have any contact with the local authority, this is well reflected in case records or pathway plans.

- Safeguarding risks to care leavers, including sexual exploitation, are routinely identified by social workers and personal advisers, acted upon swiftly and escalated to multi-agency meetings appropriately. Information-sharing across the partnership is robust and the quality of plans generated from these meetings is beginning to improve. In weaker examples, plans for young people are not sufficiently specific or measurable and contingency arrangements are insufficient.
- Arrangements to monitor young people who go missing have improved. However, return home interviews are not always completed in a timely manner and the quality of the information is poor. As a result, professionals are not always able to reduce risk effectively for each young person, and valuable information to prevent future missing episodes is not collected or used to inform planning for the young person.
- Care leavers receive timely support to start preparing for independence and are well supported through a range of commissioned and in-house services. Care leavers report well-targeted training to prepare them for adulthood and were particularly positive about the opportunity to access the training flats provided by Devon.
- Senior leaders have ensured that the health needs of care leavers have been prioritised since the findings of the last inspection. Pathways for care leavers to access their health records have been strengthened, and partnership working with health colleagues is now effective. Care leavers consistently receive more timely health assessments and the take up of dental checks for care leavers is also significantly improving.
- The use of 'staying put' with former foster carers to ensure continuity of support in a family environment while preparing for independence is well promoted. Currently, 49 young people are benefiting from living in 'staying put' arrangements.
- Senior managers have considerably strengthened arrangements to ensure that care leavers have access to sufficient, suitable and safe accommodation. Effective partnership arrangements with the housing department and a clear corporate commitment to sustaining this offer have resulted in increasing numbers of care leavers having access to secure tenancies. In September 2018, 92% of care leavers are in suitable accommodation, which is a significant improvement when compared with 64% at the last inspection. Bed and breakfast accommodation is only used as a last resort. The placements of the very small number of young people living in bed and breakfast accommodation are risk effectively assessed, and the welfare of each young person is monitored closely. Care leavers spoken to by inspectors report feeling safe and say they have access to suitable accommodation.
- Assessments of care leavers are not routinely updated following significant events or changes in circumstances. This is a key priority for senior leaders, and while action has been taken recently to address this weakness, it is too early to identify its impact.

- Pathway plans continue to be too variable in quality and timeliness. Pathway plans are not routinely updated following significant events or changes in circumstances for the young person. 'Scaling' is used by workers to measure the young person's well-being and preparation for independence. However, the purpose and the impact of this activity are unclear, and scaling is not routinely resulting in a well-considered analysis of risk. Pathway plans do not sufficiently describe each young person's independence skills and do not always explicitly detail the entitlements that the young person should receive.
- Arrangements to ensure that care leavers are aware of their entitlements have been significantly improved and now include the newly updated local offer, a user-friendly guide which provides an accessible overview of support and signposting to additional services for care leavers in Devon.
- The level of support and expertise offered to unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people in Devon is a strength. Partnership working is effective and assessments and plans for this group of young people are routinely clear, specific and measurable, and result in consistently good outcomes for them.
- Arrangements to ensure that care leavers access education, employment and training have been strengthened through the appointment and work of the virtual headteacher. Monitoring and tracking of care leavers' learning and training are now effective. A multi-agency group, Care Leavers in Education, Employment and Training meets regularly and is resulting in increasing numbers of care leavers participating in ongoing learning and development. While the number of care leavers in education, employment and training has increased since the last inspection, and is now in line with national averages, senior leaders are working purposefully to ensure this increases further and aspirations for care leavers are consistently high.
- Opportunities for care leavers to influence service provision are well embedded, and care leavers have contributed meaningfully to the redesign of pathway plans. Additionally, care leavers have helped design and inform the creation of the care leavers' local offer. This is now an effective and user-friendly guide for care leavers, setting out what they can expect from Devon staff, entitlements, money, accommodation and all methods of support and access to services. However, while some care leavers are aware of the Children in Care Council, most do not feel engaged in the matters discussed or outcomes from council meetings. Senior leaders are in the process of consulting with care leavers to explore other avenues through which more care leavers can voice their opinions on the service they receive.
- Caseloads have reduced overall since the last inspection. However, while social workers describe manageable caseloads, personal advisers report that the high number of young people allocated to them adversely affects their ability to complete timely case recording. The quality of case recording in the permanency and transitions teams is inconsistent and, while improving, is not always sufficiently explicit in detail.

- Following significant focus by senior leaders, the quality and timeliness of supervision is improving and in most cases is leading to improved practice and better outcomes for young people. However, while management oversight is taking place, it is not always recorded in a sufficiently comprehensive or coherent manner, and key decisions are not routinely accompanied by a clear rationale.
- Senior leaders have prioritised staff recruitment and retention effectively through a revised and strengthened employment package. Workforce stability across the service has improved significantly and while there is some use of agency staff, this is very limited. Consequently, care leavers are increasingly benefiting from the continuity of relationships that a stable workforce affords.
- Workforce development has been a key area for development for senior leaders, and the delivery of high-quality training is now supported by a clear and revised learning and development framework. However, training, for example on pathway plans, has been recognised by senior leaders as an area for development, but is not yet included in the training brochure in Devon. Staff spoken to by inspectors do, however, report access to high-quality training and feel well supported by managers.
- The quality of performance information has very recently been strengthened, and managers now have access to a suite of high-quality performance information. Senior leaders recognise that work is now required to ensure that managers and practitioners, at all levels, use this information purposefully to robustly scrutinise performance across the service.
- Quality assurance arrangements in the care leavers' service are underdeveloped. No themed or individual audit activity has taken place in the care leavers' service for the last six months. While lessons learned from a peer review in June 2018 have been acted on and disseminated to staff, it is too early to evidence how these lessons have resulted in sustained improved practice or outcomes for care leavers.

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

Yours sincerely

Emmy Tomsett

Her Majesty's Inspector