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1 March 2019

Mr David Haley
Director of Children's Services
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Dear Mr Haley

Focused visit to Swindon Borough Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Swindon children's services on 6 and 7 February 2019. The inspectors were Diane Partridge and Marcie Taylor, two of Her Majesty's inspectors.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for supporting care leavers. 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 in their education, employment and training. Inspectors also reviewed the local authority's arrangements to provide suitable and safe accommodation for care leavers.

Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including discussions with social workers, personal advisers and managers. They met with a group of care leavers and the lead officers responsible for health, accommodation provision and employment, education and training. They also considered local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

Overview

In its services to care leavers, the local authority has made some progress in most of the areas for improvement highlighted in the last inspection. Senior leaders have a clear understanding of the strengths and weaknesses in the service, supported by

the increasingly effective use of management and performance information. Changes to the organisation's structure, the stabilisation of the senior leadership team and improved partnership working are starting to create the conditions in which good practice can flourish.

The support provided to care leavers is not effective in all areas. For instance, pathway plans are often not meaningful enough for young people, reducing their value. The range of available accommodation is limited, and for some care leavers this has negatively affected their daily lives.

The director of children's services is held in high regard by the managers and staff who spoke with inspectors. He has created an appetite for change and improvement and has galvanised corporate support. This has brought much needed pace to improvement and is starting to result in better outcomes for care leavers in Swindon.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The quality of pathway planning so that it is more meaningful for young people, fully considers risk and vulnerabilities and is used effectively to measure progress and the impact of intervention for care leavers.
- The assessment of suitability and safety of accommodation for all care leavers.

Findings

- Care leavers in Swindon are supported by personal advisers and social workers who know them well and are helpful advocates for them. Personal advisers and social workers presented with confidence and articulated well their high aspirations and goals for young people, as well as describing how they are helping young people to achieve their goals. Their accounts do not always translate into good-quality written records. The current recording system is a barrier to improvement. The local authority has commissioned a new recording system, but this has not yet been introduced.
- The majority of care leavers contribute to the development of their written pathway plan. However, in the current format, pathway plans are not meaningful enough for young people. The plans do not routinely consider all needs and, crucially, do not fully address risk and vulnerability. Pathway plans are, therefore, not being used as an effective tool to fully assess young people's needs or to measure impact and progress. The local authority is aware of this and a small group of young people are currently working with managers to revise the format.
- Reviews of pathway plans are mostly held with the young person, but some are undertaken in isolation by the personal adviser. In such instances, the lack of

input from young people and their key professionals limits the usefulness of such plans.

- Increasingly, the local authority takes the needs of young people into account when determining when case responsibility should transfer between the children looked after and care leavers teams. This approach underpins the young person's best interests, ensuring greater opportunity for consistency and continuity of relationships. However, the approach is still embedding, so not all young people are benefiting yet.
- The 'local offer' for care leavers is well written and in accessible language. It clearly outlines what care leavers should expect and the services available to them, including comprehensive information on health support services. Positively, young people contributed to its development. The local authority recognises it has more to do to ensure that all care leavers are made aware of their rights and entitlements.
- The sufficiency and suitability of accommodation for care leavers is a substantial challenge for Swindon. Currently, there is no bespoke accommodation available for care leavers; they access what is universally on offer to all young people and young adults. This means that not all care leavers move to independence at a pace that is right for them, some have limited choice about where they live or they live out of borough when they do not wish to, and others do not feel safe and secure where they live. Decisions about the suitability of accommodation is not routinely informed by thorough risk assessments. This can leave some young people vulnerable. In their self-evaluation, senior leaders acknowledged that better quality accommodation is needed for care leavers. A plan is in place, but has not yet had an impact.
- Care leavers living in Swindon can take advantage of council tax exemptions up to the age of 21 years. Young people have recently asked the council to consider extending this routinely for them up to 25 years and for Swindon care leavers who live outside of the borough. The corporate parenting board is giving this request appropriate weight and consideration, and the council has agreed to extend the council tax discount for Swindon care leavers under the age of 25 in particular circumstances, based on need.
- Care leavers benefit from a good range of education, employment and training (EET) opportunities. Effective cross-council partnerships, and links with the local enterprise partnership are starting to increase the number of apprenticeships, work placements and volunteering opportunities. Frontline staff work creatively and with determination to engage young people in meaningful activities. This is resulting in improving numbers of care leavers in EET. At 60%, this is higher than the national average. However, senior managers are not complacent and have set

a target of 75% care leavers being in education, employment and training by 2022.

- The health of care leavers is well considered by children looked after nurses. They offer a service to care leavers up to the age of 25 and actively promote this by meeting with the care leavers' group and through the distribution of recently created information leaflets. A revised health passport has been implemented. The design of the leaflet was led by care leavers, and their involvement has resulted in a high-quality product. The children's commissioner has cited this as an example of good practice.

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

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

Yours sincerely

Diane Partridge

Her Majesty's Inspector