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Dear Jo Olsson

Monitoring visit of Devon local authority children's services

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic.

The methodology for this visit was in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. However, the delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. This visit was carried out fully by remote means. Inspectors used video calls for discussions with local authority social workers, personal advisers (PAs), leaders and managers. The lead inspector and the director of children's services (DCS) agreed on the arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within local and national guidelines for responding to COVID-19 and meeting the needs of the local authority's workforce.

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Devon children's services on 22 September 2020. The visit was the first monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in March 2020. The inspectors were Steve Lowe, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Nicola Bennett, Her Majesty's Inspector.

The local authority is making some progress in improving services for its care leavers, but it has more to do. Crucially, senior managers now have a clear line of sight to young people who are most at risk. The assessment of risk is more routine, and PAs are in close contact with the most vulnerable young people.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the area(s) of:

- services to care leavers, including sufficiency of accommodation and support available for young people, the assessment of risk and safety planning for young people
- senior management understanding and oversight of areas for improvement in the care leaver service.

A range of evidence was considered during this visit, including electronic case records, supervision files and notes, case discussion with social workers and PAs, meetings with team managers and young people, and other information provided by staff and managers.

Overview

The Ofsted report following the standard inspection in January 2020 was published one week before England went into full lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This had a significant impact on how Devon County Council prioritised its resources.

PAs and social workers assessed and prioritised the immediate risks to care leavers in a timely way, with the vast majority maintaining face-to-face contact with young people. The strong relationships that young people have with their PAs and social workers have kept them safe and connected during this time.

Despite the exceptional context of the COVID-19 pandemic, senior leaders have not lost focus on the failings highlighted during the last inspection. They have made progress in key areas at a pace that is in keeping with the circumstances. Senior leaders and elected members have clear oversight of those young people who are living in unsuitable and risky situations. In some cases, this results in accelerated, positive change for the young person, supported by creative commissioning to find the best possible accommodation quickly.

Through several changes in senior leadership, the DCS has been a consistent overseer. Consequently, care leavers who are at most risk retain a high profile with their corporate parents.

Assessing and responding to complex risks including county lines, domestic violence, chronic mental ill health and exploitation is improving. However, safety planning is mostly reactive and lacks multi-agency involvement. In some cases, young people remain in high-risk situations for too long. Multi-agency networks that work well in other areas of the council are not sufficiently connected to the care leavers service. Similarly, frontline managers are yet to be equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to find swift and effective solutions for those young people most at risk.

Findings and evaluation of progress

During the visit, we identified areas of strength, areas where improvement is occurring, and some areas where we considered that progress requires further improvement.

PAs see those care leavers who are facing complex risks, including exploitation, violence and connections to county lines, frequently, and often daily, to make sure that they are safe. Corporate parents at all levels know about them, they monitor their safety and they intervene when necessary. This senior-level oversight has been intensive and successful, but it is not sustainable in the longer term. Senior leaders now have a clear strategy to realign accountability and scrutiny to the appropriate level of management.

Frontline managers and PAs do not fully understand how to achieve multi-agency solutions to complex risk. Senior leaders recognise this, and training is imminent. At present, a small minority of young people are exposed to higher levels of risk than necessary, due to delays in convening multi-agency risk meetings and engaging specialist support.

PAs demonstrate tenacity and commitment to young people and build positive relationships with them, often through challenging circumstances. This increasingly translates into extra support and intervention when young people are struggling. While young people welcome this extra support, it is often in response to crisis rather than part of a proactive plan to prevent and reduce risk.

PAs are creative in securing move-on accommodation for young people in temporary accommodation. There is still not enough safe temporary accommodation, but the picture is improving. Senior leaders and commissioners have improved links with services and providers who can offer supported living. Consequently, care leavers are increasingly prioritised for settings that can meet their needs.

The improvement plan and the partnership are in their infancy, but they are well designed to build on a good COVID-19 action plan. Given the context of the pandemic, improvements are being made at a reasonable pace, following an initial phase that correctly focused on immediate risk for care leavers and other children in Devon.

As should be expected, several changes in practice are embryonic and their impact cannot be fully evaluated at this stage. For example, quality assurance through practice audits has recently been reintroduced, as has moderation of those audits by senior leaders. Young people and practitioners are not yet fully involved in the audits and feedback, but the quantity and quality of audits have improved since the last inspection. Additional quality assurance has been extensive since the last inspection, including a full review of all young people in high risk situations.

There is still too much variability in the quality of assessments. While the better assessments demonstrate good analysis and insight, weaker examples are too

descriptive and lack depth. Risk assessments through COVID-19 have been completed for all of the young people, including regular reviews. This has been a positive and quickly organised response to a time of crisis, and it demonstrates a capacity to change culture at pace.

New pathway plans have just been introduced, with increased focus on risk and safety planning. Currently, plans are not always completed in a timely way. When young people are more settled, the plans are more detailed, and the voices of young people are clearly captured. There is sometimes a lack of aspiration and articulation of what building blocks can be put in place to achieve young people's long-term goals.

Formal supervision of PAs is largely regular and is enhanced by regular risk management meetings and case discussions that respond to emerging and identified risk. Managers do not consistently provide the level of challenge that is needed to drive improvement in practice with care leavers, but there are signs that this too is improving.

Improvement in the health of care leavers and in the issuing of their health passports has been slow. There have been obvious pressures on health partners in recent times, which has slowed progress. Supporting the emotional and mental health of care leavers and tracking the distribution of health passports are key priorities for partners, but there remains much to be done to deliver on what are well-intentioned aspirations in this area.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Steve Lowe

Her Majesty's Inspector