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1 September 2022

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Dear Marium

Monitoring visit to Bradford children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Bradford children's services on 27 and 28 July 2022. This was the eighth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in September 2018. Her Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Louise Hollick and Louise Walker.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- care leavers aged 16 to 25

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Headline findings

Services to care leavers in Bradford have improved since the last inspection. Over the past year, there has been a focused drive for sustainable practice improvements in the care leavers service. The workforce has been increased and stabilised. Committed and capable senior managers have led a service improvement plan focused on the consistent application of clear practice standards. Inspectors saw improved case recording and better quality pathway plans. The voice of the young person is significantly stronger, and this is ensuring young people's views and goals are incorporated into planning. Care leavers with complex learning and mental health needs are not easily able to access adult mental health and adult social care services in order to ensure they are appropriately supported into adulthood.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Since the last monitoring visit, the senior leadership team has remained stable and committed to the ongoing improvements required across the whole of the service. Leaders' self-assessment of the care leavers service is accurate and consistent with inspectors' findings during this visit. Effective quality assurance and robust performance data are enabling leaders to have a grip and understanding of the strengths and areas for development within the care leavers service.

Audit completion numbers have improved but are still below the service-set target rate. Most of the audits contain a good level of direction about how practice could be improved. This is a useful learning tool for practitioners. Audits do not include feedback from the young person, so their lived experience is not captured in the learning.

Care leavers are well supported with financial and practical help by committed and caring social workers and personal advisors. They are provided with a comprehensive offer that has recently been republished following consultation with young people. Feedback from the young people inspectors spoke with suggests that not all of them understand the offer clearly, and it is not easily accessible. This means there is some confusion about what they are entitled to, and that they are reliant on their social worker or personal advisor explaining it to them.

Young people are benefiting from good-quality pathway assessments and plans that identify their needs. They are sensitively written in easily understandable language. The young person's views are central to the plan. This ensures that the support and interventions offered to care leavers are based on their expressed wishes and support their own goals and aspirations. Contingency planning is evident in most pathway plans. As a result, young people are clear about what should happen if their circumstances change.

Young people's faith and cultural needs are well considered. There has been significant development in the support and guidance offered to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children through the 'Child first, migrant second' protocol. These young people are now referred to as separated migrant children, in a determined drive to sensitively recognise and respond to their unique and complex needs and vulnerabilities. This is having a positive impact on the service they are receiving.

Social workers and personal advisors speak warmly and with pride about the young people they are working with and their achievements. They are visited and contacted regularly to ensure they feel supported and cared for. In emergencies they can contact a duty worker, enabling them to access help easily and swiftly.

For some care leavers there has been churn and change in their social workers or personal advisors due to a legacy of sickness and vacancies in the service. Young people told inspectors they disliked having to start again with new workers or retell their story. They were very positive about their current workers and the majority are benefiting from the stability of the permanent workforce that is now in place.

Care leavers aged 16 to 18 are well supported to develop their independence skills as they move into adulthood. Before leaving care, young people can access a taster flat, which supports them in testing out their independent living skills prior to moving on, enabling them to learn and grow in a safe and supported way. Young people's individual needs and vulnerabilities are carefully considered in order to ensure that they transition at their own pace, safely and in line with their wishes.

For young people aged over 18 who wish to secure their own tenancy, there are challenges in quickly securing appropriate social housing. Although care leavers are given priority band status with local housing providers, there is a shortage of available properties and a backlog of young people waiting for their own homes. Leaders have recognised some of the challenges with accommodation and have established a new protocol with partners. This is a very recent development that is not fully embedded or having an impact.

Young people with complex needs are not easily able to access specialist adult social care support in relation to their learning disabilities. Many young people do not meet the threshold criteria for adult social care assessments or support. For 16- to 18-year-olds, there are long waits and delays in assessments for mental health support. There are gaps and delays in the provision of specialist mental health care for young people over 18. As a result, not all care leavers have their complex needs assessed appropriately, or have the right specialist intervention in place to keep them well as they enter adulthood.

Although the numbers of care leavers in education, employment and training (EET) compare favourably with statistical neighbours, it is acknowledged as an area for improvement by the local authority. A monthly EET panel has been introduced to track these young people and there has been a small increase in the number who are in EET over the past term. Themes for why young people are not attending EET are not collated from these meetings, so any systemic issues or areas for

improvement are not identified. A small number of care leavers are in apprenticeships or have been offered jobs in the local authority.

For young people aged 16 to 18, the quality of personal education plans (PEPs) is improving and these are quality assured to assist with practitioners skills and development. The completion rate is below the local authority's target rate. This means that some young people do not have an up-to-date PEP that addresses and tracks all their educational needs and achievements.

Most care leavers have the important documents they need as they move into adulthood, such as birth certificates and passports. They have bank accounts and are given support with budgeting. Their setting up home allowance is carefully monitored to ensure it is used appropriately. This is helping them prepare for the responsibilities of independence and adult life.

Social workers in the leaving care teams have manageable caseloads that enable them to have frequent and regular contact. Caseloads for personal advisors are higher. In addition, personal advisors are committed to facilitating the groups that are benefiting young people, such as the weekly cook & eat group and the 'smooth it out' group activities. For some, this workload impacts on their capacity to spend high levels of meaningful time individually with young people.

Recruitment is continuing with the aim of reducing personal advisors' caseloads. Vacancy rates have reduced and there are increased numbers of permanent workers in place. A thorough learning and development programme has been rolled out to all staff in the care leavers service. This is helping to embed the new practice standards and guidance, and is leading to more consistent quality of practice. Social workers and personal advisors spoke positively about the developments in the service over the past year and told inspectors that there are now clear and achievable expectations.

There is regular management oversight on care leavers case records, and management sign-off of pathway plans is more robust. This is helping to track decision-making and is contributing to improved consistency of practice. Supervision notes are of variable quality, with some supervisions overly focused on compliance with tasks rather than offering reflective discussion with workers to enhance young people's planning and experiences.

Social workers and personal advisors told inspectors they felt well supported and appreciated by their managers. Most of them feel that senior managers are more visible and approachable and that this is leading to a more open and positive working culture in Bradford.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Louise Hollick
Her Majesty's Inspector

Pre-publication