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Ms Sally Hodges
Director of Children's Services
The Council House
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Dear Ms Hodges

Focused visit to Solihull Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Solihull children's services on 14 and 15 February 2018. The inspectors were Peter McEntee, HMI, and Pauline Higham, HMI.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for young people leaving care and for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC).

Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers, and met with a number of young people. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

Overview

There has been continued improvement in services for young people leaving care and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children since the last inspection. The local authority has an informed overview of its performance and practice. Social workers and personal advisers work well with young people to help them prepare for independence through detailed personal education plans (PEPs) and pathway plans, together with a range of support and guidance. Young people are almost all in suitable accommodation, with increasing use of staying put arrangements when they reach 18. Personal advisers work with young people up to the age of 25 and sometimes beyond. There is a focus on education, employment and training, with

performance in this area above the England average. Social workers demonstrate cultural sensitivity and an understanding of legislation and law in relation to the needs of young people arriving in this country. The achievements of young people in care and leaving care are celebrated and young people are able to influence policy and practice.

Findings

- Senior leaders and managers know their service well. This has enabled them to improve the quality of practice and support for care leavers and UASC and achieve positive outcomes for young people. Performance is managed well through appropriate use of data and there is a robust performance management process which identifies weaknesses that require remedial action. The children in care council, Our Voice Our Service (OVOS), has been revitalised and there is a more co-ordinated and involved corporate approach to young people in care and care leavers. The achievements of care leavers are celebrated and young people are involved in organising the celebration activity. Other sectors of the local authority have invested time and effort in fundraising and working directly with young people, helping them gain further independence skills.
- Social workers and personal advisers both demonstrate an investment and enthusiasm in ensuring that young peoples' needs are understood and met as far as possible. Those working with UASC are knowledgeable and demonstrate expertise with legislation. They are able to sensitively balance the complex needs of young people and are aware of the risks associated with unaccompanied status, including trafficking and emotional and physical harm. They also understand the need for stability for these young people.
- Age assessments for UASC are undertaken by appropriately trained staff, and demonstrate a range of evidence gathering and appropriate analysis. Timeliness is mostly appropriate; there is a recognition that in some cases, because of the complexity of the background and the vulnerability of the young person concerned, an assessment may take longer to complete. Liaison with the Home Office in regard to these young people's immigration status is in most cases timely.
- Continuous, sustained contact and support is evident in work with post-18 care leavers. Personal advisers make tenacious efforts to keep in contact with young people and overall the contact is of good quality, ensuring that young people are aware of what support is available for them. This level of engagement also means that personal advisers are aware of young people's key life developments. Only two young people are not currently in touch with the service.
- The training and development needs of the 16-plus team are addressed to ensure sustainability in meeting the demands of the service and to ensure that appropriately trained and skilled staff deliver services to UASC and care leavers.

Workers evidenced the use of independent research to support young people's needs, alongside the provision of relevant internal and external training.

Management oversight was evident in all cases seen. Supervision is regular and there is some evidence of reflection and analysis helping social workers and personal advisers to consider more fully any complex issues and how to achieve better outcomes. However, the supervision is not always consistent, and there are instances where consideration of work was more perfunctory and as a result less helpful.

- Appropriate internal and independent services, including advocacy services, are identified and accessed for UASC and care leavers to ensure that their rights and welfare needs are supported. The identity and cultural needs of young people are understood, and a 'best fit' in regard to placements is considered and often met. Young people regularly attend their reviews, and their views and wishes are represented clearly in case records and in the making of future plans.
- Almost all young people have pathway plans. However, these are not always started as soon as possible after a young person's sixteenth birthday and are often delayed until after a young person has been transferred to the 16-plus team. Although these delays don't seem to have had a detrimental effect on any young person, young people could benefit further from pathway planning that starts as early as practically possible. Once completed, pathway plans are detailed, with a comprehensive overview of key issues and they are updated regularly. Efforts are made to engage with young people in their completion.
- All care leavers aged 16 and 17 have a personal education plan (PEP). Most, although not all, are updated each term. They demonstrate considered use of the pupil premium and have a clear focus on attainment and what support and guidance is needed to help each young person improve and achieve the best outcome. The virtual school is active in ensuring the quality of these plans.
- For those young people aged 16 and 17, planning for leaving care and independence is evident and in most cases timely. Preparation in foster care placements includes basic skills such as cooking, use of appliances and money management. Care leavers and UASC are fully engaged in discussions about independence that include their options, their employment and their education. The local authority delivers an accredited national qualification on independence skills for young people (ASDAN).
- The local authority reports that 88% of young people were living in suitable accommodation in December 2017. Opportunities for living in 'staying put' arrangements beyond their eighteenth birthday are available, with increasing numbers of young people choosing this option. Where young people including UASC aged 17 and over are placed in houses of multiple occupancy, they report feeling safe.

- Young people are encouraged to enter and stay in employment, education or training. There are good relationships with local colleges of further education which take an active part in PEPs. The local authority reports that 66% of 19- to 21-years-olds were in employment, education and training in the third quarter of 2017–18 and that there are currently 20 care leavers on university courses.
- Care leavers and UASC benefit from regular health assessments and opportunities to attend dental and optician appointments. When young people have significant special needs, effective transition planning with adult services is taking place.
- Eight young people were spoken to during the course of this visit, both UASC and care leavers, two of whom had apprenticeships with the local authority. These young people feel safe where they live and are able to engage positively with staff about planning for their future. However, very few are aware of life-story work or have access to a life-story book. Gaining access to case records to support understanding of care history and early life experiences can take a long time for some young people, and they find this frustrating. Young people who have had work undertaken with them in the past about why they are in care would welcome this being a routine topic of discussion with their worker.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The approach taken with young people leaving care to help them understand their personal histories and the reasons why they entered care needs to become more routine and at the young person's pace.
- Supervision of cases should consistently contain an element of reflection and analysis to assist the allocated worker with thinking about complex issues and different approaches in seeking better outcomes.
- The point at which pathway planning starts needs to be earlier, as soon after a young person's sixteenth birthday as possible.

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

Yours sincerely

Peter McEntee HMI
Her Majesty's Inspector