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Mr Colin Pettigrew
County Hall
West Bridgford
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Dear Colin,

Focused visit to Nottinghamshire County Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Nottinghamshire County Council children's services on 30 and 31 January 2018. The inspectors were John Roughton HMI and Caroline Walsh HMI.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for its care leavers, including the preparation of relevant children in care for the transition to adulthood.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including discussions with social workers, senior managers and care leavers. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

Overview

Children who leave care in Nottinghamshire benefit from advice and support from a stable and committed group of personal advisers. Care leavers have access to dedicated achievement advisers to support their engagement with education, training and employment opportunities.

The pace of change and progress since the last inspection has not been sufficient to fully address capacity issues in the care leaving service or to ensure effective transition and support for all young people.

Although a range of supported accommodation provision is available for care leavers, this does not always meet the needs of those requiring higher levels of support.

Preparation for leaving care does not start early enough for most children. A particular consequence of this is poorer outcomes for some young people with more complex needs.

Senior leaders have a good understanding of the challenges of the services and have plans ready to address these.

Areas of strength

- Children leaving care are supported by a committed and positive workforce that knows its children well. Personal advisers communicate effectively with young people using an appropriate range of methods. Social workers and personal advisers feel well supported by their managers, despite their high workloads. Supervision is regular and clearly recorded. In the Looked After Children service, the role of social work support officers is highly valued and effective in supporting social workers to manage their workloads and prioritise direct contact with their children.
- Children and young people's needs are well assessed and understood. Most pathway plans are timely and thorough, and convey children's wishes and needs well.
- Care leavers are supported to give priority to identifying and addressing their health needs. They are beginning to receive their important health history information as they turn 18, although there have been recent capacity issues with the health provider in ensuring that this takes place routinely.
- Young people making the transition from residential care to independence are already showing improved outcomes through the intensive, flexible and creative support available to them through the recent 'Transitional Personal Adviser' pilot project. Early successes are highlighting the future potential of this model to improve the readiness of young people for independent living, and young people themselves are hugely positive about their experience of the support.
- The tenacity and focus of the 18+ achievement advisers is important and valued in helping young people to access employment, education and training provision. The advisers also provide effective advice and guidance for children in care who are considering higher education.
- Where appropriate, children are enabled to 'stay put' with their foster carers beyond the age of 18. The range of commissioned supported 'core and cluster' accommodation provision has offered many care leavers a successful transition to independence.
- Some of the most successful outcomes for children are being achieved where they have strong links with the community and voluntary sectors, for example

the Refugee Support Group, churches and Women's Aid. Young people themselves spoke of the need to be accepted and valued in their communities and recognised that accessing local activities is vital to developing their networks of support.

- Children who meet the criteria for transition to adult services benefit from early planning to ensure that their needs are well considered as they become adults. Where there is delay in adult services assuming responsibility at 18 years, the local authority ensures continuity of care arrangements to provide a seamless transition for the young person.
- A small number of care leavers are involved in the sub group of the Children in Care Council, take part in the recruitment of staff, and are consulted on strategic plans. An annual achievement awards event is highly valued and well attended by children, young people and carers.

Areas for Improvement

- Where new risks emerge for children and young people, not enough priority is given to ensuring that there is no delay in assessing need and responding to and managing risk alongside partner agencies.
- High caseloads in both the looked after and care leaving service limit the time and support that can be offered to young people who have high needs. Services are therefore frequently crisis led rather than planned. Managers in the care leaving service have large numbers of staff reporting to them and this makes it hard to offer the challenge and support needed to progress planning for young people.
- For most children, the transition and planning for adulthood and independence starts too late, with personal advisers only allocated as a young person approaches their 18th birthday. This leaves young people without secure professional relationships as they move towards adulthood. Care leavers spoken to are very positive about the practical and emotional support they receive from their workers, but identify that their workers do not have the time to offer them the level of support they feel they need to make positive changes in their lives.
- There is no dedicated support available for 16- and 17-year-old children in care who are not accessing education, employment or training to help them return to education or training before leaving care. Consequently, the bridge to getting young people back into EET when they have become disengaged is often too hard for them to cross.
- A small minority of care leavers placed in larger semi-independent settings have been exposed to new risks as a consequence of the placement. Although these risks have been managed, this highlights the need for the provision of

more intensive support accommodation to respond to the complexity of need of some children leaving care.

- More could be done to engage the wider cohort of care leavers in participation activities. Some care leavers spoken to do not feel engaged in the service, and can make valuable suggestions for service improvement. For example, all care leavers spoken to told inspectors that their pathway plans are not useful as living documents to promote change and they identified that a more accessible, summary action plan that is regularly updated would help them to make the small steps needed to improve their outcomes. This is a missed opportunity.
- Older children in care and care leavers with complex needs, including poor mental health and substance abuse, are not always able to get the help they need. The services available are not sufficiently flexible or young people-friendly to meet the needs of these vulnerable, harder-to-engage young people.
- There is no independent review and scrutiny of plans for care leavers. This means that drift or lack of progress in improving children's circumstances is not always identified or promptly addressed. There is limited evidence of independent reviewing officers challenging such delays in progress. Insufficient consideration is given by the local authority to the involvement of independent visitors or advocates for children without family contact.
- Auditing arrangements for the care leaving service are under developed, and have been largely ineffective in helping to highlight practice challenges or areas for improvement. A newly implemented revised audit tool, which focuses on outcomes for children, has been developed in response to this, though it is too soon to measure its effectiveness. Too often audits take place in isolation from practitioners, and so far there has been little thematic learning emerging to inform service improvement.
- The local authority has a good awareness of the challenges faced by the service, and its recently refreshed partnership strategy seeks to respond to these challenges. However, the pace of change since the last inspection has been too slow to deliver more positive outcomes for many existing care leavers. There has been a lack of strategic planning for the significant rise in care leavers stemming from the high number of children aged 16 and 17 who came into care in 2014–15. The local authority has plans to restructure its care leaving service to provide support for children from 16 to 25 years from April 2018, to improve transitions for children leaving care. In its planning, the local authority needs to ensure that there is sufficient workforce capacity to achieve its strategic intent of improving outcomes for all care leavers.

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

Yours sincerely,

John Roughton

Her Majesty's Inspector