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Steve Miley
Director of Children's Services
London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham
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Dear Mr Miley

Focused visit to Hammersmith and Fulham local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Hammersmith and Fulham local authority children's services on 11 and 12 September 2018. The inspectors were Andy Whippey, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Anne Waterman, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for care leavers. They looked at a range of evidence, including through case discussions with care leavers, social workers and managers. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and young people's case records.

Overview

Care leavers in Hammersmith and Fulham receive effective support that helps many of them to achieve good outcomes. Since the last inspection in 2016, the local authority has disaggregated most social care services for children from the joint arrangements with Kensington and Chelsea, and Westminster, although some shared services remain. Senior managers continue to be clearly focused on sustaining and improving outcomes for care leavers and are aware of the areas where improvement is needed.

Highly skilled workers are persistent in engaging effectively with care leavers. All care leavers, apart from those in prison custody, are in suitable accommodation, and the use of 'staying put' arrangements when they reach 18 years old is increasing. There is a clear determination to ensure that care leavers access education, employment and training (EET), and most care leavers receive help in developing skills to promote their independence.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Consistency of quality of pathway plans.
- An action-orientated, outcome-focused improvement plan.
- The involvement of care leavers in service improvement.
- Apprenticeships/job opportunities through corporate parenting initiatives.

Findings

- Individual risks to care leavers, including those at risk of sexual exploitation, are clearly understood, and the necessary support is provided to reduce risks. Care leavers are supported to think about their choices and to keep safe. Workers increase their visits appropriately to reflect the level of need. Workers offer good support when young people experience day-to-day difficulties. While risks are identified clearly, and risk assessments are undertaken, in some cases there is a lack of clarity about the risk minimisation plan to address these.
- Staff make significant and tenacious efforts to stay in touch with young people leaving care. The local authority has been proactive in offering ongoing support to care leavers if necessary, even when there has been no statutory duty to do so. Social workers work hard to build rapport, and several young people reported positively about the quality of support and advice offered to them. Staff are aware of the new responsibilities to care leavers under the Children and Social Work Act 2017 and have made efforts to communicate these to young people.
- Care leavers currently in custody are supported effectively. Their workers make sustained efforts to keep in contact, even when young people are not immediately receptive to such contact. Planning for each young person's release is timely, with good partner agency communication and provision that reflects need.
- Care leavers have good access to a range of local accommodation options, and receive prompt and flexible support and advice. Care leavers rarely have to wait for suitable accommodation. A positive commitment to promoting 'staying put' arrangements means that many young people are able to remain with their foster carers if this continues to meet their needs. Support is quickly offered if difficulties arise with or in accommodation. This proactive approach to accommodation support means that, in recent years, few care leavers have been evicted from their accommodation. Whenever possible, care leavers are supported to live close to their neighbourhoods, and a high proportion either live within the borough or in an adjoining borough. Young people who spoke to inspectors said that they felt safe and were satisfied with their accommodation.
- Care leavers who are unaccompanied asylum seekers or refugees receive good support from their social workers, including help with understanding how to

progress their application to settle in the United Kingdom. In all cases seen by inspectors, these young people were in suitable accommodation and were supported to access education. Sensitive consideration is given to their histories and they are supported to access help for their emotional and mental health needs.

- Social workers and staff at the virtual school are energetic and aspirational for care leavers. There is a clear focus on efforts to engage young people in EET activities. Effective individual support, delivered through a range of initiatives by staff at the virtual school and the 'looked after children assist' project, enables many care leavers to access EET activities. The monthly EET panel ensures that there is sufficient tracking of those young people who are, or are at risk of becoming, NEET. The high number of care leavers in higher education receive timely and effective financial and practical support to help them to complete their studies. The local authority's aspirational approach to achieving positive EET outcomes for care leavers is a strength.
- More needs to be done to increase the number of apprenticeships and opportunities to engage in enrichment activities and work experience for care leavers, either directly within the local authority or through its commissioning arrangements. Senior managers and leaders are committed to this, and appropriate plans are in place.
- The physical and emotional health needs of care leavers are clearly identified and considered. The flexible approach adopted by the looked after children's nursing service and the focus in practice team enables the health needs of care leavers post-18 to be met. At the age of 18, care leavers have a meeting with the lead nurse and receive their full health history in writing. The local authority is now developing a health passport to ensure that this information is more accessible.
- Young people are encouraged to develop their independent living skills wherever they live. Inspectors saw many positive examples where young people had been helped effectively to develop key independence skills through their accommodation provider, the 'looked after children assist' service or their foster carer. Workers have a clear focus on how they can help young people to develop these skills. For a minority of young people, the plan relating to how their independence skills will be promoted is unclear. An important challenge for many care leavers is how to manage their money and navigate the benefits system. Staff are aware of this and offer courses specifically to help young people to tackle these challenges.
- Pathway plans vary in quality. Many pathway plans are good; they are aspirational and cover all aspects of a young person's life, and clearly demonstrate the young person's involvement in the development of the plan. However, some pathway plans are not thorough enough, or they are not updated after significant changes in young people's circumstances, and actions are not progressed in a timely way. Records do not always show whether young people

have received a copy of their plan, or whether any changes have been made to reflect young people's views. Some plans do not contain a record of management sign-off.

- The recording of management oversight of casework is not sufficiently robust. In some records, there is little evidence of management oversight of important decisions being made, or when there are significant changes in young people's circumstances. Staff feel valued and supported, although records indicate variability in the frequency and quality of supervision. In some cases, it is an update on young people's circumstances, but contains little or no analysis and does not provide clarity as to the actions needed to help improve outcomes for care leavers. There is insufficient management oversight of the small numbers of care leavers with whom the local authority is not in contact, although there was evidence of staff trying to keep in touch.
- Senior managers and leaders are not systematically capturing the views and experiences of care leavers to help to inform service improvements. Care leavers who spoke to inspectors said that they are not consulted through any formal mechanism. This means that their lived experiences are not sufficiently considered in planning future service improvements. Senior managers are aware of the need to strengthen the voice of care leavers on the corporate parenting board.
- Case audits seen by inspectors did not sufficiently evidence the lived experience of care leavers or the impact of the work undertaken. In some audits, there was a lack of clarity as to the actions required, which was a missed opportunity to identify what needs to be done to improve practice.
- Senior managers have recognised the need to review and update certain key documents to reflect the change from the triborough arrangements, such as the sufficiency strategy. This will ensure that such documents have a clear focus on the needs and arrangements for care leavers and children in care in Hammersmith and Fulham.
- Staff have access to a wide range of induction and training opportunities. They report that they are supported and encouraged to engage in training and development events. These events provide good opportunities to reflect and focus on practice improvement with care leavers. Caseloads are manageable and enable workers to undertake effective direct work with young people.
- Senior managers have a good understanding of the strengths in the service and are aware of the areas for further development. However, the service improvement plan needs to be strengthened to better articulate the actions proposed and the outcomes sought for care leavers.

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



Yours sincerely

Andy Whippley
Her Majesty's Inspector