

24 August 2017

Ms Gladys Rhodes White
Buckinghamshire County Council
Walton Street
Aylesbury
Buckinghamshire
HP20 1UA

Dear Gladys

Monitoring visit of Buckinghamshire children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Buckinghamshire children's services on 25 and 26 July 2017. This was the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in June 2014. The inspectors were Stephanie Murray, senior HMI, Linda Steele, HMI and Pauline Higham, HMI.

Leaders have continued to secure improvement in key areas, such as the stability of the workforce and some performance relating to care leavers. However, inspectors found that care leavers cannot yet rely on a service that is responsive to their individual needs, that supports them into independence and ensures that they benefit from the same opportunities as other young people.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made since the last inspection, with a focus on five themes:

- the effectiveness of support for care leavers, including: the quality of relationships between young people and their social workers and personal advisers; the suitability of young people's accommodation; preparation for independence; and support to promote young people's health, education and training
- progress made in increasing the stability of the social care workforce, including within the aftercare service
- the quality of staff and case supervision within the aftercare service
- the effectiveness of key aspects of the local authority's governance arrangements in supporting the improvement of services for care leavers
- how quality assurance arrangements and performance information assist leaders and managers in overseeing and improving services for care leavers.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including electronic case files, meetings with social workers, personal advisers and managers, conversations with young

people, discussions with senior and political leaders and partners, and analysis of relevant documents and data.

Overview

Senior and political leaders work together to prioritise vulnerable children in their strategic plans, and have ensured that quality assurance arrangements and performance data provide them with a much clearer view of frontline practice than at the time of the inspection. Inspectors noted sustained progress in important areas, such as an increase in permanent staff in almost all teams. However, sufficient improvements in the experiences of care leavers are not evident, and practice remains too inconsistent. In addition, the corporate parenting panel does not meaningfully engage with care leavers, which reduces its effectiveness.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Based on the evidence seen during the monitoring visit, inspectors identified some areas of strength, some positive changes that have been made and a number of areas where we considered that improvements have not been achieved as swiftly as needed.

- Inspectors found that the quality of support for care leavers varies too much. For example, some do not receive the level of help that they need to develop independent living skills. A booklet used by personal advisers to facilitate this work is out of date, and young people think that it is boring. As a result, not all young people are adequately prepared for a successful move to adulthood.
- Personal advisers visit the majority of young people regularly, but are not always proactive, persistent or creative enough in engaging harder-to-reach young people. In addition, many visits lack purpose or do not meet the individual and changing needs of young people. In a few cases seen, personal advisers demonstrated their care for young people by going the extra mile to support them. The care leavers spoken to by inspectors said that they have helpful relationships with their personal advisers.
- Overall, the quality of pathway planning is too variable. Although a few good examples were seen, the majority of plans do not demonstrate what difference the support that young people receive is making to them, particularly in relation to their confidence, skills and opportunities. Most plans seen lacked a clear identification of need and did not include specific actions and timescales. Risk assessments are not evident in plans, so actions that may be needed to address young people's individual vulnerabilities are often absent.
- Plans and reviews for care leavers lack contingencies and, consequently, personal advisers are not always as responsive as they should be to young people's changing circumstances. Pathway plans are not routinely overseen by someone other than the allocated social worker or personal adviser. This is a missed opportunity to ensure robust challenge and scrutiny of young people's plans and progress.

- The recent restructuring of the aftercare service, with the main aim of ensuring that children looked after over the age of 16 have a smooth transition to the services that will support them after their 18th birthday, has been broadly welcomed by social workers and personal advisers. Personal advisers work closely with social workers once young people reach the age of 16, and young people have greater choice about who will support them. This promotes continuity and choice for young people.
- Personal advisers work with around 25 young people, some jointly with social workers. Leaders and managers closely oversee caseloads across the service. The aftercare teams are stable and are almost entirely made up of permanent staff. At the time of the visit, just one part-time post remained vacant. This supports enduring relationships between young people and their social workers and personal advisers.
- Support is available, through a commissioned service, to care leavers who wish to complain, and some use this service to raise the issues that they are worried about. However, the young people who spoke to inspectors said that they do not know how to make a complaint. A leaving care booklet is available, but it is out of date, and young people spoken to were not aware of its existence, thus reducing their access to information about their entitlements.
- The majority of care leavers live in accommodation that is considered suitable by the local authority. The care leavers who spoke with inspectors said that they are happy with their accommodation. They feel safe not only in their homes but also in the area where they live. A 'staying put' policy is in place, and at the time of the visit 29 young people over the age of 18 were living with their former foster carers. However, leaders acknowledge that the policy needs to be reviewed. It is overly complex and does not evidence the flexible approach that senior managers say is applied in practice. Staff and managers say that the steps required to help young people to remain with their carers under a 'staying put' arrangement are prohibitive and are likely to put foster carers off. A young person said that the process is confusing.
- Bed and breakfast accommodation had been used for seven care leavers in the 12 months preceding the visit, for periods of up to two months. Inspectors were concerned that a lack of formal risk assessment, including an absence of careful checking of who else is living in the accommodation, means that these arrangements are potentially detrimental to young people. Young people are not always afforded a second chance to make a success of their own tenancy.
- Providers of semi-independent accommodation who spoke with inspectors were positive about their relationship with the local authority's commissioning team and the aftercare service.
- Care leavers who are in custody receive appropriate support from their personal advisers. Young people are visited regularly, and case records show evidence of wide-ranging discussions, including practical support and good attention to emotional needs and the quality of the education that young people receive.

- A broad range of well-coordinated support is available to care leavers to help them to continue with their education or to find a job, traineeship or apprenticeship. Helpful information, advice and guidance from the virtual school support young people well.
- Senior and political leaders have not directly involved care leavers meaningfully in the corporate parenting panel, and members of the panel have therefore missed an important opportunity to hear at first hand about the reality of young people's lives. Care leavers contribute to decision-making about the appointment of social workers and managers, but, overall, engagement with them by senior and political leaders is underdeveloped.
- Inspectors found no evidence that young people are given a summary of their health history when they reach the age of 18. Although this is included in the local authority's improvement plan, progress has been too slow. As a result, young people may be unaware of important details about their health, or the health of family members, when seeking or requiring medical treatment.
- Leaders, including the director of children's services, the leader of the council, the lead member for children's services and the chief executive, spend time with staff across the service to observe practice and to hear at first hand about challenges and achievements on the front line. Inspectors saw examples of leaders having taken action to improve the working environment of staff in response to concerns that they raised. Compliments and feedback about good practice are routinely shared with staff.
- Case supervision within the aftercare service is neither frequent nor effective enough to ensure consistency of practice. In the majority of cases seen, management oversight is superficial, with no challenge or evidence of the tracking of progress of pathway plans. Management decisions often simply refer to signing off risk assessment or pathway plans. Although the frequency and quality of staff supervision are improving, supported by a targeted training programme and refreshed guidance, this is not yet making a tangible difference to the oversight of practice within the aftercare service.
- Solid progress continues to be made towards workforce targets, particularly in increasing the proportion of permanent staff across the service. Investment in newly qualified social workers and the provision of financial support to employees who wish to train to be social workers are contributing to this progress. Leaders are rightly focusing on recruiting permanent staff to the court and child protection teams, as this is the part of the service where instability remains a concern.
- The quality assurance framework is comprehensive, with an established auditing cycle that includes the experiences of care leavers. Findings feed into plans to improve practice. However, for care leavers, quality assurance activity has not led to sufficient improvements in all areas, for example the quality of pathway plans and management oversight.
- Overall, management information enables leaders and managers to maintain a clear oversight of performance across the service. Data and intelligence

colleagues interrogate this information to analyse strengths and weaknesses. In a few instances, targets are over-ambitious. More realistic benchmarking in these areas would enable leaders to be clearer about what good or concerning performance looks like. Further, the recording system used for young people over the age of 18 is cumbersome and unhelpful. Managers rely on time-consuming manual systems to oversee the day-to-day work of the aftercare service. Although the introduction of a new system is imminent, this has taken too long.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will also be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Stephanie Murray
Her Majesty's Inspector