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Dear Ms Sivers

Monitoring visit of South Gloucestershire local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to South Gloucestershire local authority children's services on 24 October 2018. The visit was the fifth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in February 2017. The inspectors were Joy Howick, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Rachel Griffiths, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Since the single inspection of local authority children's services (SIF) in February 2017, the local authority has made some good progress in improving services for its care leavers. The council and senior leaders have continued to embrace the role of corporate parents, taking purposeful and creative steps to improve outcomes for care leavers. Care leavers are a high priority in South Gloucestershire.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made for care leavers, including:

- The effectiveness of arrangements to ensure that the local authority discharges its duty as a corporate parent to care leavers and to increase the opportunities for care leavers to work, train and gain employment experience.
- The quality and effectiveness of pathway planning processes for care leavers.
- The extent to which care leavers receive clear and effective advice and guidance regarding their entitlements.
- The frequency and quality of visits by social workers and personal advisers (PAs) to care leavers.

- The quality of management oversight, challenge and staff supervision in these services.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, supervision files and other supporting documentation. In addition, we spoke to a range of staff, including service managers, team managers, personal advisers, social workers and administrative staff.

Overview

Senior leaders know their care leavers' service increasingly well and have growing support from elected members to improve the lives of care leavers. A clearer focus by senior leaders on raising practice standards through more rigorous quality assurance of casework and strategic planning is having a greater impact on improving some key aspects of care leavers' experiences. These include keeping in touch with the overwhelming majority of care leavers, access to good accommodation for care leavers, and a well-established employment, education and training offer. Care leavers have been instrumental in developing policies to raise practice standards and in shaping services, such as a 'drop in' centre that is better attended and provides care leavers with additional practical and emotional support.

Some areas of practice are well established, such as social workers' and PAs' constructive working relationships with care leavers and the use of independent advocates to ensure that care leavers' views are heard and acted on.

Senior leaders understand where practice needs to improve further to maintain the trajectory of improvement. For example, actions to improve the quality and consistency of pathway plans, transition planning, health passports, quality of supervision, case recording and the opportunity to 'stay put' with foster carers are underway. These areas are not yet fully embedded in practice, which means that not all care leavers get a consistently good service.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Based on the evidence gathered during the visit, inspectors identified areas where improvement is occurring, and some areas where we considered it was too soon to see the impact of the second phase of the local authority's improvement plan.

Quality assurance of practice by managers through auditing of casework in the care leavers' service is increasingly rigorous. A growing strength is the introduction of young people's participation in the auditing process. This provides a more powerful picture of what life is like for care leavers and the impact their personal adviser or social worker has on improving their lives. Staff recognise the positive difference that the auditing process and the involvement of care leavers in auditing has had on their practice. For example, one member of staff explained that, in response to an audit, they now write for the young person, as they recognise that the care leavers'

case notes form part of their life story. This means that the young person has a more accessible and detailed record of their life. The collation of lessons learned from audits has led to the introduction of a helpful set of best-practice examples, now regularly used by staff. As a result, care leavers' views and wishes are now more consistently recorded in the most recent pathway plans.

Overall, audits are more comprehensive, providing more challenge and accuracy. Auditors now critically evaluate and challenge the quality of the team managers' supervision records. This is progress since the last monitoring visit. As a result of learning from audits, the quality of some supervision records has improved. Nevertheless, too many supervision records still have specific areas of weakness, such as a lack of clear actions with timescales and follow-up by the manager to ensure that actions have been completed. In a small minority of cases, care leavers' plans are not progressed or reviewed as quickly as they should be. However, supervision takes place regularly and staff report that they feel well supported.

Although the team for the transition to independence (TTI) manager has made a good start in improving the quality of this team's work, case recording remains too variable. While better records were seen, with a clear purpose and subsequent plan, for too many care leavers, their records are either not kept up to date by their social workers or they do not provide sufficient details. The lack of timely and good-quality records hinders the manager's ability to monitor frequency and quality of visits. It prevents any other professionals, for example from the out-of-hours service, knowing how to best support a care leaver.

The relationships that TTI and the disability service have with care leavers are a developing strength. Staff in the TTI team are effective at keeping in touch with the vast majority of care leavers. The team is making more strenuous efforts to maintain links with those with whom they are not in contact. All staff who inspectors met knew their care leavers well. Social work practice based on strong and constructive relationships is helping to create an environment which enables young people to feel safe and accept challenge from their worker. Feedback from care leavers demonstrates that care leavers value their personal advisers or social workers, and states that they can trust and confide in them.

The provision of an effective independent advocacy service is a strength for care leavers. Senior leaders ensure that commissioning arrangements for the independent advocate and visitor service continue for as long as care leavers request it. Inspectors saw examples of staff advocating effectively for their care leavers by appropriately challenging other professionals on behalf of them. This helps to ensure that care leavers get the best support and that their wishes are respected.

Pathway planning in the disability service is a growing strength. In the TTI service, pathway planning is improving, and since the SIF inspection, there has been a significant improvement in the numbers of care leavers participating in the completion of their plans. Consequently, care leavers have a better understanding of

their plan and care leavers are more likely to achieve goals that they have been involved in setting.

Nevertheless, weaknesses remain in too many pathway plans in the TTI service. Some plans are repetitive, some lack specific details, and actions are sometimes vague with no timescales. A small number of care leavers had commented that they found their written pathway plan as being 'not relevant' to them. Other pathway plans lack contingency plans. This creates the risk of delay to improving the outcomes for care leavers. The managers' actions, which include the introduction of group supervision and the provision of good case work examples, are helping staff to address this area of weakness. It is too early to see the full impact of this.

Early transition planning is not yet consistently effective. Inspectors saw a small number of 16- and 17-year-olds without a pathway plan or with an out-of-date plan, thus preventing effective planning for these young people. Senior managers are aware of this and are developing transition pathways to ensure better planning for all young people. This is also supported by the recent improvements seen in the quality of independent reviewing officers' (IROs) contribution. Inspectors saw examples of more concise and specific recommendations made by IROs in looked after reviews that are effective in informing transition plans for young people.

The vast majority of care leavers live in suitable accommodation. Staff work hard to get the very small minority who do not resettled in suitable accommodation as soon as possible. As a result of effective liaison between senior managers and the housing department, care leavers are given the highest priority on the housing list and can apply for a secure tenancy on more than one occasion, even when they have left or lost previous accommodation. This demonstrates that the local authority has a growing understanding of good corporate parenting. Care leavers receive the important message that the local authority will continue to support young people when they have made mistakes.

Too few care leavers benefit from the opportunity to remain with their foster carers in a 'staying put' arrangement after their 18th birthday. The local authority recognises that it does not currently provide sufficient incentives for foster carers to promote these arrangements. When care leavers do remain with their carers, there is sometimes delay in managers agreeing these plans, which causes uncertainty for the young person. Although senior leaders have an action plan to enable more care leavers to remain with their carers, this has not yet been implemented. Therefore, not enough young people have the benefit of the additional security that living in a family environment provides.

Currently, 60% of care leavers are engaged in employment, education and training (EET). This is the result of a series of actions, including the creation of a wide range of EET opportunities overseen by the virtual college and the employment of a specialist worker based in the TTI service. For those young people who are not engaging in any form of EET, there is either a very good reason for this or a clear pathway of support to help them gain suitable training, education, work experience or employment.

A gap remains in the provision of suitable services to support the emotional well-being of all care leavers when a mental health issue has not been diagnosed. Social workers and personal advisers consider the physical and emotional needs of care leavers. Although there are groups available, it is harder for care leavers to access individual emotional well-being support. Currently, care leavers are not provided with health passports when they leave care. This means that they do not have important medical information that they will need as adults. Senior managers have begun to address this with health partners as part of the next phase of their improvement plan.

The looked after children in care and care leavers council, experience panel in care (EPIC), has a strong and active voice. The looked after children in care and care leavers are beginning to positively influence how services are delivered in South Gloucestershire by taking part in the recruitment and training of staff. They have been instrumental in the redesign of a new pathway plan template. An excellent and comprehensive care leavers' guide created by the EPIC group provides care leavers with clearer information about their rights and entitlements. However, this guidance has not yet been distributed to all care leavers and it is too early to see the full impact of the guidance in supporting all care leavers to know their rights.

An area of significant improvement since the last SIF has been the development of the care leavers' drop-in service, developed in response to care leavers' feedback. This has resulted in care leavers having a warm and welcoming place where they can meet friends, have fun, and access a wide range of support. The drop-in is helping to reduce isolation for care leavers. It also supports care leavers to build local links in their community and to play a more active role within it. This a valuable and important resource which helps to build care leavers' resilience and self-esteem.

Elected members and staff at every level are developing a greater commitment to their role as corporate parents. Regular awards ceremonies celebrate the achievements of care leavers and this is appreciated by them. There have been a number of positive developments that impact on care leavers' day-to-day lives, for example the council tax exemption, the development of the drop in service and a care leavers' Christmas day dinner event. Last year, this involved 24 care leavers, including unaccompanied asylum seekers, who would have otherwise been on their own on Christmas day. They had a meal and enjoyed the festivities with personal advisers, social workers, all levels of managers, senior leaders and elected members. Active fundraising throughout the council resulted in care leavers receiving personalised and thoughtful gifts, which demonstrated that they are well known and cared for by their corporate parent. Feedback from care leavers was so positive that a further, bigger event is planned for this year.

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

Yours sincerely

Joy Howick
Her Majesty's Inspector