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Dear Nicola and Jo

Monitoring visit of Slough children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Slough children's services on 28 February and 1 March 2017. This was the second monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in February 2016. The inspectors were Stephanie Murray and Margaret Burke.

The council and the trust are making promising progress from a very low base in improving the experiences of their care leavers. In particular, inspectors noted a marked and positive shift in leaders' shared commitment to these young people.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of the visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the experiences and progress of care leavers, with a focus on three themes:

- the effectiveness of support provided by the leaving care service and key partners, including the quality of needs assessments and pathway plans
- the commitment to care leavers by senior and political leaders, including the effectiveness of strategic arrangements and the pace of change in establishing and developing a discrete leaving care service
- the provision of suitable accommodation, and employment, education and training opportunities to care leavers.

The visit considered a range of evidence, including electronic case files, conversations and meetings with young people, a visit to a semi-independent accommodation provider, meetings with social workers and managers, discussions with key senior and political leaders, and analysis of key documents and data.

Overview

Since the inspection, and particularly since summer 2016, the council and the trust have together taken determined steps to raise their ambition for care leavers and to embrace their role as corporate parents. This is a substantial shift from the inspection. Senior and political leaders invited care leavers to share with them how difficult their lives had been, and together they agreed meaningful promises through a re-launch of the pledge. This work left a lasting impression on leaders and has helped to drive improvements.

Corporate and strategic arrangements have improved at a faster pace than operational services, mainly because it has taken longer than planned to establish the new leaving care service with a full complement of personal advisors (PAs) in place. As a result, positive changes in practice and in young people's experiences have only been achieved in the three months prior to this visit. Further work is needed to improve the reliability of performance information, to ensure that all care leavers receive consistently helpful support, and to establish a solid and sustainable service. Although inspectors found that almost all recent practice requires improvement to be good, there are now a few examples of strong support to care leavers that is making a demonstrable difference to their lives. This is a notable improvement from the inspection.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Based on the evidence gathered during the visit, we identified a number of areas of strength, some areas where improvement is occurring and a few areas where we considered that the progress has not taken place as quickly as needed.

Following the inspection, senior managers established a panel to review the support provided to individual care leavers. This enabled leaders to assure themselves that young people were safe and appropriately cared for while the foundations were laid for a new service. The panel continues to be used well to agree packages of support. Some care leavers were found to have experienced very poor care and, for these young people, the service continues to support them beyond statutory requirements.

The care leavers' hubs, first launched in October 2016, are now fully operational, with a combination of permanent and temporary staff making up a team of nine PAs. This is an increase from three. Individual caseloads have decreased from over 60 to around 20. Comprehensive bespoke training and hub supervision for these staff are improving practice.

Case tracking and sampling during the visit found that some young people had not received adequate support in the months following the inspection. However, in all cases the trust had already identified and begun to rectify these deficits. Recent work evidences that most care leavers live in suitable accommodation and are seen by their PAs at least six weekly. The visiting frequency standard is monitored by the trust. Some work lacks purpose, and this is linked to supervision that does not

always consider the help and support that young people need or why. An incomplete understanding of some young people's histories or their complex needs reduces the effectiveness of the support that they receive.

Recent needs assessments and pathway plans meet minimum standards, and some are comprehensive, with diverse needs considered well. Plans are in place before children reach the age of 16. Care leavers told inspectors that they are now well engaged with their assessments and plans. This is evident in pathway plans which include young people's views in their own words. In cases seen, care leavers who go missing are visited soon after they return, and appropriate arrangements are in place to assess and reduce the risk of child sexual exploitation.

Senior managers and political leaders, including the interim director of council children's services, the chief executive of the trust and the lead member for children's services, have taken assertive steps to strengthen the corporate and strategic arrangements underpinning the leaving care service. In partnership with young people, a new pledge to care leavers was agreed in April 2016. This was followed by a re-launch of the corporate parenting strategy.

The corporate parenting panel is now a well-attended and lively forum. It has a sharper focus on care leavers and an increasingly systematic approach to reviewing the experiences of young people against the promises in the pledge. Changes to the council's constitution enabled the trust and the council to chair this panel jointly from December 2016. This was an important development. However, the panel has not been able to rely on performance data relating to care leavers, for example on the proportion who are in touch with the service, and this has reduced its ability to oversee and track progress. Although senior managers express confidence that this information is now of much improved accuracy, further work is needed to ensure that key data is consistently reliable.

The care leavers' forum, established in July 2016, has a strong voice within the council and the trust. Effective advocacy and participation arrangements are in place, and care leavers now believe that if they complain they will be heard. Care leavers consistently told inspectors that they believe that the adults who support them aim high for them, and that they feel listened to.

The council's young people service and the trust's virtual school are working together well to promote meaningful education, employment and training opportunities for young people. The interim chief executive of the council is driving plans to increase apprenticeships for care leavers within council services, and numbers are steadily increasing. Established links with local employers and further and higher education establishments, employment days, mathematics and English drop-ins and targeted work with children looked after who live outside of Slough are beginning to have an impact. However, most care leavers who are in full- or part-time education do not benefit from a coordinated plan to support them to be successful in their studies.

Plans are in place to address this by extending the use of the personal education plan approach to care leavers.

Local authority data indicates that increasing numbers of care leavers live in suitable accommodation. Bed and breakfast accommodation is not used. Slough's housing team is committed to corporate parenting priorities, and the recently established case-based approach enables housing and trust managers to identify solutions for care leavers whose accommodation is at risk. The approach is also used to consider the likely future housing needs of this group. Creative work is underway to strengthen the local accommodation offer, but it is too soon for most of this work to have had an impact. A 'staying put' policy is in place, and increasing numbers of care leavers live with their foster carers beyond the age of 18. The quality of semi-independent accommodation is reviewed via announced and unannounced visits. However, formal contractual arrangements with these providers are not in place. This is a gap.

Further work is needed to strengthen partnership arrangements for individual care leavers. For example, it has taken too long to develop a document for recording and sharing care leavers' health histories. Access to health advice and support for care leavers is inconsistent. The involvement of adult services with those young people who meet the threshold for this support is too often reactive rather than central to their plans. This reduces the ability of PAs to understand and plan to meet the complex needs of young people. A transitions policy is in place, and the care leavers' service and adult services now need to ensure that it is consistently applied.

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