

9 September 2024

Dheeraj Chibber
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Dear Mr Chibber

Focused visit to Luton children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Luton children's services on 31 July and 1 August 2024. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Jenny-ellen Scotland and Rebecca Quested.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for care leavers aged 18 to 25. This visit focused specifically on:

- Preparation and support into adulthood.
- Keeping in touch.
- Care leaver local offer.
- Support for former separated migrant children.
- Support for care leavers in custody and/or leaving custody.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with personal advisers (PAs) and managers. They also talked to care leavers and looked at the local authority performance management and quality assurance information and care leavers' records.

Headline findings

Care leavers' experiences of transitions and support into and through early adulthood are too variable. While some care leavers described positive relationships and sensitive support from their PAs, for others the support provided is not meeting their needs.

This visit found skilled and enthusiastic PAs and frontline managers committed to meeting the needs of care leavers but hampered by workloads that are too demanding. Leaders have identified these challenges, linked to an increase in overall

care leaver numbers, and taken some action to increase capacity. However, this action has not yet made an impact on the ground, due to recruitment challenges. Leaders accepted the findings of this visit and have agreed to take immediate action to improve the experiences of all care leavers.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?

- PA capacity.
- Support for care leavers who are in custody and/or leaving custody.
- Care leavers' access to suitable accommodation.
- The clarity, comprehensiveness and delivery of the local offer.

Main findings

Most PAs have caseloads that are too high. This is impacting on the quality, quantity, timeliness and consistency of support that they are able to offer. For a few care leavers, this has resulted in them experiencing crises that may have been preventable with additional support from their PA. Some care leavers expressed concerns to inspectors regarding PA caseloads and how this limits the support they receive from them. Leaders have recruited two additional PAs and more recently have agreed to the urgent recruitment of two further temporary PAs while they undertake a workforce review.

Most young people do not have the opportunity to get to know their PA before they become adults. There has not been effective planning in preparing the care leaving service to support those young people who have turned 18 or are about to turn 18. Recent audit activity has highlighted that the care leaving service is not included in the case transfer policy, which has led to inconsistencies in the transfer process from the social work teams to the care leaving service. At the time of the inspection, the local authority was addressing this.

Despite their high caseloads, some PAs take time to get to know their care leavers, with some care leavers speaking powerfully of the positive impact PAs have had on their lives, supporting them into employment, their own homes and settled status and 'always being on the end of the phone'. Most PAs are curious about their care leavers' well-being and safety, ensuring they are aware of their rights and entitlements. However, not all PAs know their care leavers well enough and most struggle to visit them regularly enough.

The quality of pathway plans is variable. They are written to the young person and often capture their voice and views. Carers, parents or partner agencies are not routinely involved in pathway planning. A few stronger pathway plans are used effectively to identify objectives and plan support to enable the care leaver to progress. There is no management oversight of pathway plan reviews. An independent reviewing officer (IRO) has been assigned to the care leaving service,

which provides additional oversight for those most vulnerable care leavers. However, it is sometimes unclear when, how and why the IRO was allocated to a young person.

There is variability in the completion of safety plans for care leavers who are at increased risk from themselves and others. For some, there are clear plans in place, overseen by managers. For others, particularly those leaving custody, the risk assessment is delayed and unclear.

Some of the care leavers spoken to did not have a clear understanding of their entitlements. While most PAs understand the local offer and can explain entitlements to young people, the lack of specificity in some aspects of the offer contributes to uncertainty and inconsistency. The local offer is currently only available in English, but plans are being progressed for it to be available in other languages.

Care leavers told inspectors that the availability of suitable housing is a major issue. They are unable to understand the bidding process and have identified inconsistencies in the application of the process with their peers. The joint housing protocol provides care leavers aged 18 to 21 with band three status when they are bidding for properties. This means that they are not a priority and are only considered for housing if no one in band one or two has bid for it. Once they are over 21, they lose any priority status. This poses real difficulties for care leavers in securing a home.

Former separated migrant children who are now care leavers are well supported to obtain their right to remain and subsequently their settled status. Some pathway plans lack ambition, with a focus on supporting the young person to apply for benefits as opposed to supporting them to find employment. Pathway plans are not routinely translated for young people, with an over-reliance on them using translation apps. Leaders have advised that they are arranging for all pathway plans to be translated.

The small number of care leavers who are in custody do not have the opportunity to keep in touch with their PAs. None of the care leavers in custody looked at during this visit had been visited within the practice minimum standards of every six to eight weeks. For some care leavers in custody, this is due to difficulties in the prison and probation services which have not been escalated to leaders in those services. Until recently, care leavers were not in receipt of an allowance while in custody, which created further hardship and disadvantage for them. Care leavers leave prison in an unplanned manner, with no multi-agency planning or support in place. Once they have left prison, there is limited contact or support from their PA.

Some care leavers are benefiting from targeted support plans to assist them into education, employment or training. However, support in this area is not provided consistently to all care leavers who might need it. Progress in increasing the number of care leavers who are in employment, education or training has been hampered by

inconsistent data. The lack of reliable data has prevented an accurate understanding of the situation and acknowledgement by the care leaving service that this is an area of need.

Some young people aged under 21 who should have been allocated a PA for a statutory service have in the past been closed prematurely. The local authority has recently identified this as a small cohort of young people who have not been provided with information about their rights and entitlements as care leavers. A few of these care leavers have unsuccessfully tried to re-engage with the service for support. The local authority has taken some action to re-establish contact with this cohort, but these actions have not been sufficiently proactive or effective. Leaders have arranged to allocate a PA to the care leavers who have requested a service and will urgently review the whole cohort with a view to these young people being allocated a PA.

PAs reported loving their roles and feeling supported by their managers. All the PAs met by inspectors told them about their overwhelming caseloads, the impact this was having on the support they can provide young people, and the impact this was having on their own personal and family lives. All PAs are aware of the strong training offer. However, they said they have limited opportunity to access training due to workload pressures.

Supervision is not consistently taking place at the expected frequency. Supervision records are written to the care leaver and have clear actions that are aimed at supporting the progression of plans.

The local authority arranged for inspectors to meet and speak to a significant number of care leavers during this visit. All the young people have great ideas about what is needed to improve the service, with many wanting to be involved in this. Some are keen to use their own experiences to support young people through peer mentorship. Leaders are arranging to meet with care leavers to take this offer forward.

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

Yours sincerely

Jenny-ellen Scotland
His Majesty's Inspector