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Dear Ms Cockerell

Focused visit to Wokingham Borough Council local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Wokingham local authority children's services on 11 and 12 December 2024. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Alison Smale and Tom Anthony.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for care leavers, including support into adulthood and the quality and suitability of accommodation.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Headline findings

Care leavers in Wokingham benefit from personal advisers who develop trusting and stable relationships with them. The structure of the Here4U team, which supports children in care aged over 16 and care leavers, encourages and enables joint working and continuity as children move into the care leaver part of the service. Staff working with older children in care and care leavers talk about them with love and care. This is reflected in their commitment to them to do well and to get the right support at the earliest opportunity.

Strong corporate and political commitment during the last year has ensured that changes have been implemented which have improved the experiences and outcomes of care leavers in Wokingham. A permanent senior leadership team has also been established this year, which includes the appointment of a permanent director of children's services. The new team has worked at pace to strengthen the support offered to care leavers and this is making a positive difference.

Some initiatives are very new but are already having a significant and positive impact on the quality and capacity of services. Leaders are responding effectively to the rapidly growing number of older children in care and care leavers; this increase is in

part due to more asylum-seeking children arriving via the National Transfer Scheme, but also to a number of asylum-seekers being placed by the Home Office in local hotels as adults, who are subsequently being identified as children. The local authority's investment in a significant expansion of local accommodation options has enabled vulnerable care leavers to live locally, with the right level of support to prepare them for independence. The local offer to care leavers has been enhanced and care leaver status is now recognised as a protected characteristic, which is strengthening the corporate parenting approach across the council. Support to care leavers over the age of 21 and to care leavers who are parents is less strong.

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

- Arrangements to support care leavers over 21 and those who are parents.

Main findings

Care leavers and older children in care benefit from regular visits and phone contact from their personal advisers and social workers. Care leavers receive regular newsletters and information about their entitlements, which ensures that even those care leavers who are less accepting of support are kept up to date with developments and events.

Many care leavers actively participate in and value events provided by the Here4U team. The team offers many opportunities to network and build lasting relationships, as well as positive cultural and social activities, which the care leavers enjoy.

Most care leavers are aware of the care leaver offer. The offer has been improved since the last inspection. A wide range of benefits are available to care leavers, including leisure and sports opportunities and council tax exemption, irrespective of whether they live in or outside of Wokingham. Care leavers who have not been granted leave to remain in this country, due to their status, are not eligible for many aspects of the offer, which can leave them feeling excluded.

The offer for care leavers over 21 is not sufficiently clear, meaning that some older care leavers do not receive the support that they need. For some older care leavers, support from the local authority drops off at a stage in their life when they may be seeking to secure permanent accommodation or have other responsibilities, such as becoming a parent. Decisions to step down to the 'care leaver offer' without an allocated personal adviser are frequently made without sufficient consideration of the care leaver's individual needs. To their credit, many personal advisers continue to support their care leavers anyway, but this is less structured and without the benefit of up-to-date pathway plans. This additional investment of time is not reflected in their workload management.

The quality of pathway plans is inconsistent. The views of care leavers are captured in their pathway plans, but the quality of the recording is variable. Local authority leaders are aware of these weaknesses and are implementing improvement plans. Recent training for personal advisers and social workers is starting to have a positive impact on the quality of written records.

The physical and emotional needs of care leavers are mostly well considered. Personal advisers and social workers make sure that care leavers are able to access the universal services that they need. Some use creative approaches, such as information booklets with QR codes, to ensure that care leavers are well informed about local health and other services. Most care leavers are well informed about their health history through access to their health records. Some care leavers are wary of discussing sensitive issues for cultural reasons, despite considerate encouragement from staff. Older children benefit from access to the children in care child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS). Timely access to adult mental health services for older care leavers is more variable.

Some care leavers continue to benefit from the involvement of the virtual school, but it is more variable for older care leavers. Support includes the attendance of virtual school staff at drop-in sessions for care leavers, as well as individual engagement and support which help them to maintain or return to suitable education. Care leavers who have come to this country as unaccompanied children seeking safety through asylum are well supported to attend college, both to learn English and to develop their career pathways. The virtual school provides regular oversight and proactive support through personal education plans, which are used to ensure that care leavers receive additional tuition and materials to support their education.

Insufficient consideration is given to the specific needs of some care leavers who are parents. This means that they may not be well supported to access universal or targeted support to help them as young parents. Many are over 21 and only receive intermittent contact. Their pathway plans are not up to date or complete. Management oversight is often formulaic and not personalised to the care leaver's specific needs. In some cases, referrals are made to children's social care without a clear rationale or discussion with the care leaver who is the parent.

The support to care leavers in custody has improved since the last inspection. While in custody, care leavers continue to be visited and receive support from personal advisers, both face to face and virtually. This provides a link to their networks outside prison and means that the local authority maintains oversight of their well-being and progress while in custody. Pathway plans are updated and reviewed so that there is clarity about what support these highly vulnerable young people require to make progress. Long-term future planning is in place, even for those who have received lengthy custodial sentences.

Care leavers are benefiting from the increasing sufficiency of local accommodation. This is enabling many of them to live locally while safely developing their independence skills with on-site support. Another example of improvement is the fortnightly housing panel, which provides a critical resource and enables effective future planning towards independent accommodation.

Since the last inspection, leaders have reviewed and strengthened the council's performance and quality assurance frameworks, which means that leaders have a much more accurate assessment of how well their services are doing for children and the remaining areas for improvement. While there is a comprehensive approach to understanding quality and performance, leaders know that the application of this still needs some improvement. For example, the creation of a revised Children's Services Improvement Board is very recent, and its impact is not yet evident. Some areas for improvement, such as the quality and timeliness of supervision and the timely review of pathway plans, have not been sufficiently improved. Care leavers are not consistently involved in the quality assurance process, or lessons learned embedded in the service.

Gathering feedback from children in care and care leavers is increasingly a strength. A care leaver forum provides regular opportunities for consultation about the design and impact of services. Leaders evidence these changes through a 'you said, we did' approach. This means that feedback from children in care and care leavers is valued and is increasingly embedded in the local authority's priorities and service design.

In recent months, leaders have agreed key strategic improvements and strengthened support for care leavers, making a tangible difference to their lives. Accommodation options have improved and are continuing to do so, the virtual school enables many care leavers to access education and maintain their educational progress, and increased capacity in the Here4U team and specialist roles such as the staying close worker are all contributing to the development of a much-improved service.

An improved offer to staff is resulting in a more stable workforce. The local authority has welcomed its first cohort of Frontline student social workers and has secured funding for social work apprenticeships. Reliance on agency social workers has reduced. Although formal supervision varies in frequency and quality, staff feel supported by their managers and view recent changes as helping them to support care leavers more effectively.

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

Yours sincerely

Alison Smale
His Majesty's Inspector