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Dear Ms Daly

Focused visit to Portsmouth City Council local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Portsmouth City Council local authority children's services on 25 and 26 February 2025. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Rodica Cobarzan and Amanda Maxwell.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for care leavers aged 18 to 25, with a particular focus on:

- the quality and suitability of accommodation
- education, employment and training
- support into adulthood
- care leavers at risk of specific types of harm, such as criminal exploitation.

Throughout this letter, care leavers are referred to as care-experienced young people because this is the preferred term in the local authority.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. This visit was carried out entirely on site. Inspectors considered a broad range of evidence, including care-experienced young people's individual records, and undertook case discussions with personal advisers and leaders. Inspectors also spoke with care-experienced young people. Inspectors reviewed relevant local authority performance and quality assurance information.

Headline findings

Services for care-experienced young people in Portsmouth have improved since the ILACS inspection in 2023. Senior leaders and elected members have demonstrated a tangible commitment to improving outcomes for care-experienced young people and have achieved a range of improvements that are better supporting them as they make the transition into adulthood. The local authority has increased the range of accommodation options for young people, and this enables more young people to live locally, both with support and independently.

Leaders have ensured that there is sufficient staffing to meet the needs of care-experienced young people, and this includes the additional support of a 'staying close' team that has made a significant difference for many care-experienced young people's progress, stability and well-being.

Corporate parenting arrangements have been strengthened, with priorities being informed by the views of care-experienced young people who take part in a wide range of participation events, meet elected members, and are engaged in the annual 'Feedback February'. Care-experienced young people have been part of the development of the new pathway plan which the local authority has piloted and evaluated and is now due for implementation.

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

- How well care-experienced young people, particularly the most vulnerable, are supported to access employment, education and training.
- How effectively care-experienced young people are made aware of their entitlements and their right to access their health histories.

Main findings

Most care-experienced young people get to know their personal advisers sufficiently early to allow relationship-building before young people become adults. Personal advisers build effective, supportive and trusting relationships with young people in preparation for adulthood.

Personal advisers maintain regular contact with care-experienced young people, adjusting the frequency of visits to meet their individual needs and circumstances. This personalised approach is key in ensuring the effectiveness of the guidance and support offered to young people. Personal advisers know care-experienced young people well and are enthusiastic and ambitious for them. This helps to enable most young people to access the practical support offered. Care-experienced young people who came to this country as children seeking asylum receive well-coordinated support. They are supported well to access education, to explore career pathways, and to address their legal status, so that they can achieve stability in their living arrangements.

Care-experienced young people are encouraged to maintain positive relationships with others important to them and are supported in reconnecting with family and peers. The Lifelong Links programme supports young people to build these connections and young people themselves talked about the value of this service.

A new local offer, which was co-produced with care-experienced young people, has recently been published by the local authority. The increased setting-up home allowances, access to a bus pass, support towards independence, council tax exemption to 25 (regardless of where young people live), and rent deposit scheme

are some of the positive changes in this new offer. Despite this, local authority leaders are not complacent and know that more work is required. They continue to consult with care-experienced young people to review the impact of the offer through ongoing feedback.

Pathway plans are mostly updated in a timely manner and reflect care-experienced young people's input, their voices, wishes and hopes. A small number of plans could benefit from further development, particularly in terms of their impact focus and in how well they detail the specific support young people need to help them to overcome more complex challenges.

Significant work has been undertaken by the local authority to develop a comprehensive employment, education and training offer for care-experienced young people. While the local authority is ambitious in its drive to improve outcomes, too many care-experienced young people are not in education, employment or training. The most vulnerable young people are often those least likely to access the opportunities and support. There is ongoing work, including with a good range of partner agencies, to identify and support young people earlier and in a more individualised way.

For some care-experienced young people, the options available have been successful and they are supported to attend higher education, access the Employability Academy, 'Starting Out' programme, for all children and young people seeking safety and asylum, or the 'Future Me' re-engagement programme. A few care-experienced young people are undertaking apprenticeships, both within and outside the council. Inspectors heard from some apprentices directly about the progress they made and the positive impact they feel this has had for them.

Most young people live in accommodation that meets their needs, and many are benefiting from the increasing range and volume of local accommodation available to them. Leaders acknowledge that there is more to do to ensure that all young people live in accommodation that meets their needs well and do so in a timely manner. The weekly housing panel is an effective forum to support safe planning for care-experienced young people, especially those who are more vulnerable. A wider range of options, from independent living to 'staying close', are now supporting more care-experienced young people to live safely and to receive support that makes a positive difference for them. A small number of care-experienced young people are experiencing repeated moves while waiting to be in their permanent accommodation; this has a negative impact on them achieving stability and progressing with other aspects of their lives.

Most care-experienced young people are well supported to build their independence skills through a broad variety of programmes. The step-by-step approach to supporting young people through a wide range of services is well developed and effective. As a result, young people experience this learning and transition at their own pace.

While young people are supported with their health needs, their access to, and knowledge of, 'My Health Story' remain underdeveloped. Care-experienced young people with problematic drug use receive increasingly effective support, but challenges remain in engaging all young people who could benefit from these interventions.

Care-experienced young people who are at risk of criminal and sexual exploitation are supported well by their personal advisers. Discussions at the multi-agency risk management meetings are effective; they often include young people directly, and lead to support that is helping to keep them safer.

Personal advisers also provide non-judgemental, caring support to young parents and to young people in custody.

The relational model of practice is well understood and applied by personal advisers. This approach, alongside additional training, such as Up2U, has supported many personal advisers to strengthen their skills. This, in turn, is making a positive difference for young people. The local authority has a strong focus on the professional development pathways for personal advisers.

The frequency and quality of supervision that staff benefit from are supporting practice improvements for most care-experienced young people. For a small number, the recording of supervision, including how actions are set and their completion tracked, is weaker and supervision could challenge and stretch personal advisers more effectively to help them to develop their practice.

The performance management framework has been strengthened. Consequently, leaders now have a much clearer line of sight to the difference that practice makes for young people and to areas that need to be further strengthened. This is further bolstered by a quality assurance framework that is generally robust, well embedded and helping to lead to practice improvements. The local authority continues to develop its work in this area; they have recognised that a more succinct and focused audit tool would better support collaborative practice and the identification of learning. Learning from practice is routinely disseminated across the workforce.

Personal advisers speak positively about the visibility of leaders and of the quality of their leadership and communication. They also value the support from their managers which, in turn, helps them to better support care-experienced young people.

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

Yours sincerely

Rodica Cobarzan
His Majesty's Inspector