

12 July 2024

Merlin Joseph  
Executive Director of Children's Services  
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County Hall, Cross Street  
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Dear Ms Joseph

### **Focused visit to East Riding local authority children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to East Riding local authority children's services on 15 and 16 May 2024. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Jan Edwards and Jenny-Ellen Scotland.

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
- suitability of accommodation
- keeping in touch
- care leaver local offer

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), social workers and managers. They also talked to care leavers and looked at the local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's records.

### **Headline findings**

Since the last ILACS inspection in 2023, when care leavers was judged to require improvement, leaders have worked hard to implement the improvements needed, but this remains a work in progress. A significant number of changes to support a whole-council approach to corporate parenting and to make it everyone's responsibility have been implemented. The local offer has been revised and co-produced with young people but requires further work in phase 2 of its development to consider what more can be done. The pathway service has received investment to increase its personal advisor (PA) and managerial capacity. This has enabled leaders

to expand the offer to care leavers so that PAs are now allocated to children at an earlier age.

Most care leavers, including those who are disabled, are well supported into adulthood by a committed team of PAs. The vast majority of care leavers, including those who are living out of the authority, are living in homes which are considered suitable and PAs are effective at keeping in touch with young people. Many young people have been supported well in their ambitions and are making impressive strides in their work, education and personal lives.

The pathway service is newly reconfigured, and the governance of the new corporate parenting board is in its infancy, as is the infrastructure which supports the pathway service. Consequently, leaders have a clear vision and understanding of what remains to be implemented.

A small number of older care leavers expressed some concerns to inspectors regarding where they were living. Leaders responded quickly to these findings, reviewing each of the young people's situations. A number of care leavers were unclear about the content of the revised local offer and were unsure regarding what it entailed. The voice and influence of care leavers has been integral to leaders' vision for the whole service, including the pathway service. However, the care leavers forum is currently underrepresented and is not effectively providing leaders with the wider representation of care leaver voice. Leaders recognise this and have recently created new arrangements to better engage with children in care and care leavers.

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

- The promotion of the local offer to all care leavers.
- The development of the voice and influence of young people through the care leaver forum.

### **Main findings**

Care leavers are supported by knowledgeable and highly committed staff who work persistently and support them to navigate their new independence and into adulthood. Since January 2024, arrangements have been in place for children in care to be dual allocated to a PA and social worker at an earlier age. This is beginning to support the early development of a relationship and to support the formal transition from care to care leaver status. PAs are able to develop trusting relationships with most care leavers which endure to the age of 21 and beyond. It is the quality of their relationship which is enabling young people to make progress, often following an unsettled time or periods of crisis. PAs value the relationships that they have with young people and spoke of feeling privileged to be welcomed into their lives.

The new practice standards for work with care leavers are not sufficiently embedded to ensure consistency of practice in written pathway plans, although there was no detriment to the services provided to care leavers. This inconsistency is found in the extent to which the direct views of young people are included in plans. The pathway plans that are written in the young person's own words are powerful documents that give a fuller sense of the young person and their needs. Most plans focus on what is important for the young person at the time, which makes it relevant to them. Some of the social work led pathway plans for younger care leavers do not have enough detail to outline how they will be supported into independence effectively. The stronger plans are helping young people to identify their own goals, ambitions and needs and are reviewed regularly with them to ensure that they remain relevant. These stronger plans provide clarity for PAs to follow with young people when supporting them to make progress. Plans are reviewed every six months; however, they are not consistently updated when there is significant change for a young person and so will not reflect their current circumstances. PAs are ambitious for their young people and work well with them to achieve their goals.

Care leavers with more complex or multiple needs, for example those who are parents or with additional vulnerabilities, benefit from effective multi-agency and partnership work coordinated by their PA. For most young people, their mental and physical health needs are addressed in their plans and the right services are in place to meet those needs. However, there are long waiting times for assessment for neurodiversity when this is required.

When care leavers reach the age of 21, an assessment is undertaken, and services remain in place for those with new or continuing needs. For those care leavers who no longer need a service they are reminded of being able to contact the service up to the age of 25. Many young people stay in touch with their PAs, even beyond the age of 25. Some older care leavers choose to have a light touch level of contact. PAs make efforts to remain in contact through a variety of means. An annual letter to keep in touch has been recently instigated.

Transitions for disabled care leavers start early in order that plans for them are in place by the time they reach 18 years old. Care leavers are allocated at 18 to the new Futures Plus adult service. A joint children's and adults panel is supporting both directorates to forecast and future plan for children when they need services as an adult. However, at operational level, written records are not evidencing sufficiently well the joined-up working and the benefits to the young person.

Children and care leavers benefit from the services of the Mental Health and Emotional Well-being Service (MHEWB), who offer direct therapy sessions for children up to the age of 18. This invaluable service is supporting children when they are approaching leaving care and when they have specific therapeutic needs. This means that children's anxiety is reduced, they can regulate their emotions and develop their confidence. When care leavers who are aged 18 and over need additional support, professionals in the MHEWB service identify the most appropriate service for them to access and provide consultation directly to carers or their

workers. This supports the care team to develop a deeper insight and understanding of the young person and to tailor accordingly their accommodation needs and support plan.

The care leaver local offer has been improved and is made available digitally and with accessible translated versions. While there are a range of benefits which care leavers can access, there are aspects of the offer which could be further strengthened, in particular care leaver apprenticeships and ensuring that care leavers receive equity of financial support no matter where they live. There are currently no apprenticeships offered by East Riding council and only one care leaver is in an apprenticeship with an external provider. Within the 'family business' approach, the new corporate parenting strategy is ensuring that council directorates, starting with adult services, will be offering training and apprenticeship opportunities for care leavers. Service leaders, the chief executive and lead elected member for children's services are committed to developing opportunities for children and care leavers and are galvanising the whole council and local businesses to provide these opportunities at pace.

Written records show that young people are told of their rights and entitlements under the local offer. PAs have a good understanding of what is available and use the offer as a working document when accessing this on young people's behalf. However, almost all young people seen by inspectors said that they did not know what the local offer is and whether, as a result, that they had received all their entitlements. Leaders accept that there is more to do to widely promote the local offer and are appointing a communications officer to support this.

Most young people are well supported by their PAs and their accommodation providers with developing their readiness for independence. A new step-by-step guide for independence coproduced by care leavers will ensure a consistency of approach across the whole children in care service. This will form part of the evidence for housing readiness for them to take up their own tenancies.

There are a large number of housing options available for care leavers through semi-independent living, supported accommodation and seven trainer flats. There is a challenge with throughput of housing stock becoming available for young people to become tenants in their own right. This means that many care leavers stay in supported accommodation long after they need this level of support. The specialist accommodation officers in the pathway service provide exceptional knowledge and develop positive working relationships with housing providers. This ensures that they can navigate the challenges of housing applications and ensures that care leavers can evidence the appropriate living skills to make them a good tenant. PAs work well with providers to ensure that the right support is provided and aspire for them to achieve sustainable secure tenancies. This is discussed with young people at the earliest opportunity so that work can be undertaken to prepare them for a successful move at the right time.

The local authority's sufficiency strategy is currently underdeveloped, and leaders are working to develop their forecasting model and business insights for care leavers. Senior leaders are alert to the challenge of sufficiency of appropriate homes for care leavers within East Riding. They are addressing and monitoring housing options through a working group and a recently initiated accommodation subgroup of the corporate parenting board. Improved joint working is supporting creative solutions in converting trainer flats to tenancies and in developing bespoke homes for children with highly complex needs. Young people are also supported to remain with their foster carers in 'staying put' arrangements. This ensures that young people have continuity of a stable home and relationships at this important time in their life.

A significant number of care leavers live outside East Riding in neighbouring authorities. Often care leavers are supported to live in areas that they know well from being in care. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking (UAS) children and care leavers routinely live in a neighbouring local authority. For some care leavers, this is providing easy access to a mosque to support their religious observances. UAS care leavers are well supported in their immigration applications and with accessing health, dental and education services by their PAs.

The vast majority of young people live in accommodation which is considered by the local authority to be suitable to meet their needs. However, a small number of older care leavers expressed some concerns to inspectors regarding where they were living. Leaders responded quickly to these findings, reviewing each of the young people's situation and immediately establishing that their safety was not currently compromised. Furthermore, the director of children's services responded quickly and arranged to meet these young people the day after the inspection visit to hear their views directly.

The council has recognised the needs of care leavers by granting them protected characteristic status. This means that care leavers will be prioritised across all functions of the council. Leaders and the corporate parenting board recognise there is still much more that can be done by them as good parents and grandparents for the children and young people of East Riding.

Following the review of the pathway service by the national implementation adviser for care leavers in September 2023, improvements to the service have gathered momentum and pace. The pathway service for care leavers has been underdeveloped and corporately underinvested. Corporate parenting has been re-energised with a redesigned corporate parenting board based on a champion model approach. The board is now represented at a very senior level as a recognition of the importance of children's rights across the council and with partners. Recruitment of two care leavers, one of whom will co-chair the board, is under way. Four subgroups have been developed to reflect the main priorities for care leavers. The new Corporate Parenting Strategy is a call to action for elected members, officers and partners who have been challenged to think 'What can I do in my role to help children and young people in and leaving care?' These new governance

arrangements are very recent, and it is too soon to judge the impact this will have for children and care leavers.

Leaders undertake a significant range of quality assurance activity which is part of a systemic continuous improvement cycle. This is providing leaders with a clear line of sight to practice. There are also several forums for collating and tracking learning. However, leaders recognise that they need to be 'smarter' in how they collate and disseminate learning for individual practitioners.

Inspectors met and spoke to a number of care leavers, including UAS care leavers and a small representation of the Children in Care Council. While there is a range of new initiatives to embed the voice of young people, the care leaver forum is underdeveloped and requires further recruitment and re-energising. Leaders are aware of this, and plans are under way for further development. The existing members are highly committed and are sincere in wanting to help leaders to improve the experience of care leavers. Leaders recognise this and have recently created new arrangements to better engage with children in care and care leavers. Inspectors heard from some children in care and care leavers that the new services in place to seek their views and engage them in service design had improved. However, the new arrangements are not yet embedded to demonstrate impact. The small number of young people spoken with provided inspectors with mixed but persuasive feedback. Some are highly positive about the help they had been given, with one saying, 'I would not be where I am today if it was not for them,' while others were less so. Some reported too many changes of PA, not getting a response when they most need it, and challenges in accessing their records. The director of children's services arranged to see these young people as a matter of urgency to resolve their concerns and is determined to embed the voice and influence of children across the whole service.

PAs said that their supervision is providing them with a reflective space to think about their care leavers and to test out new ideas. This is not yet translating into the quality of written records, which often lack this level of reflection and professional curiosity.

The PAs inspectors met at this visit are providing a responsive service to care leavers, including when they ask for help; they visit young people regularly and according to their needs and provide intervention or signpost to services to address their needs. They are proud of their young people and the small or large achievements they make. These are often recognised through the Care Leaver of the Month Award and in annual celebration events.

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

Yours sincerely

Jan Edwards  
**His Majesty's Inspector**