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Dear Carly

### **Focused visit to Barnsley children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Barnsley children's services on 25 and 26 January 2023. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Claire Beckingham and Anna Gravelle.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for care leavers.

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

### **Headline findings**

Workforce challenges and workload pressures since Barnsley's last inspection in 2018 have weakened the quality and impact of frontline practice. The service keeps in touch with care leavers. However, the approach is often piecemeal, with young people visited by a number of different social workers and personal advisers, making it harder for care leavers to sustain the meaningful relationships they need to have with trusted adults to support their transition to adulthood.

A new senior leadership team in place since the last inspection has a good understanding of what needs to be improved. Its members have secured significant investment and launched a comprehensive programme of development across the council's children's services. The plan for care leavers is in its early stages of development and its implementation and impact are not yet sufficiently evident. However, the plan already incorporates the areas for improvement noted by inspectors at this focused visit.

The council and its partners are ambitious about improving opportunities for care leavers, and there are some strengths. Most benefit from appropriate housing, and are encouraged in their education, training and employment. From January 2023, care leavers have been receiving a revised local offer which is clearer and has greater discretionary financial entitlements than the previous offer. At the time of the visit, some care leavers were starting to benefit from this offer.

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

- Earlier opportunities for care leavers to build supportive relationships with consistent personal advisers.
- Workload capacity and management oversight of support for care leavers.
- Needs assessments and pathway plans, including regular review when young people's circumstances change.
- The integrity of performance data used across children's services.
- The regularity and impact of quality assurance activity.

## Main findings

Most care leavers are not able to form positive and trusting relationships with their personal advisers (PAs) early enough because they are not allocated until just before or after the young person's 18th birthday. As a result, workers are not spending enough time building strong relationships with young people and helping them to understand their rights and entitlements to enable a seamless transition into adulthood. Staff sickness and high caseloads compound these issues. PAs are unable to provide bespoke support around independence planning; rather, they have to rely on support workers or foster carers to help with this.

While most care leavers do receive regular visits, this is not usually from a consistent PA but by multiple team members. The result is a piecemeal approach. The small number of care leavers who have experienced a consistent PA describe them as 'brilliant'. These young people know their rights and entitlements. Others told inspectors they had not seen a PA for a long time, or were unsure if they were still receiving a PA service. For a few care leavers with complex needs, visiting is not in line with their needs. Leaders have planned recruitment to address these challenges, but currently there is insufficient capacity to consistently undertake meaningful direct work with young people.

Most pathway plans are underdeveloped and do not give a strong sense of the young person and their needs. Pathway plans are not consistently reviewed and updated when care leavers' needs change. Many do not include multi-agency team input to monitor progress and identify unmet needs, or give details about the local offer to help care leavers understand their rights.

Records do not consistently evidence proactive work to drive improved outcomes for care leavers. In many young people's cases, it is not clear how their needs have been assessed to inform their pathway plan. Limited performance data and unreliable manual checking systems make it difficult to see how many pathway plans are out of date. Leaders have recently introduced a new electronic records system to improve recording and oversight of practice. Workers are still learning to use the package and the data collected is currently unreliable. Care leavers' views are mostly referred to within plans, but their voice is limited. Where care leavers' own words are used it is more powerful. From speaking with care leavers and in review of the local

authority's strategic plans, the voice of care leavers within services is also underdeveloped. Senior leaders recognise this and plans are in place to strengthen the involvement of care leavers within local services.

Most care leavers are attending further or higher education, are in employment or training. Where they are not, the reasons are known and there is a plan to re-establish opportunities. Inspectors saw positive examples of joint working to help care leavers find the right options for themselves, including bespoke apprenticeships and consistently allocated specialist PA support from the Targeted Information, Advice and Guidance (TIAG) service.

Most care leavers are living in suitable and safe accommodation that meets their needs and they are supported with moving costs. Leaders know that there is more to do to increase options for care leavers to remain within Barnsley. For a small number of young people with complex needs, workers are not persistently supporting them to explore and seek appropriate accommodation.

There is a lack of early and coordinated transitional support for some disabled care leavers. Delayed adult social care support was evident within case audits as well as practice.

Former unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers are provided with suitable accommodation that is meeting their needs. Support from TIAG is helping these care leavers to attend and make progress at college and to achieve their career aspirations. However, staff are not consistently updating their needs assessments and pathway plans with information about the young people's experiences or past trauma. Their health and well-being needs are not well considered to inform longer-term support actions to assist their progress.

Care leavers who are parents, care leavers in custody and older care leavers do continue to receive a service regardless of whether they are in education or training. They are visited regularly, although not always by a consistent PA or in line with their needs during this period of their lives. Where care leavers are out of area, the local authority ensures that they receive equivalent financial support for discretionary services such as the winter support package of a Christmas hamper and the utility bill top-up for care leavers in independent or semi-independent accommodation.

Most care leavers' records do not evidence how they are being supported with their physical and emotional health. Currently, the child and adolescent mental health services offer is under review after a recent pilot including care leavers who were already open to the service.

Supervision takes place frequently and supervision records contain a summary of care leavers' current circumstances; but supervision is not reflective or ambitious enough to drive progress for young people. Management capacity is insufficient to provide effective oversight of practice with care leavers. There has been a long gap in quality assurance activity within the care leaver service. This has been recognised

by the senior leadership team and manager training on a new framework took place in December 2022.

The council and lead member demonstrate their commitment to supporting you, as the new executive director of children's services, with increased funding to drive the developments needed. Leaders know their services well; their self-assessment and substantial development plan reflect an accurate understanding of what needs to be improved. They were highly receptive and responsive to feedback throughout the inspection process.

While some staff are cautious about new developments, and have experienced a lot of change in senior leadership in recent years, they are excited by the changes, plans and developments for care leavers. Staff describe a visible senior leadership team whose members are starting to deliver the changes they promise. They feel supported with their workloads.

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

Yours sincerely

Claire Beckingham  
**His Majesty's Inspector**