

13 January 2025

Mary Kearney-Knowles
Director of Children's Services and Education
Bath and North East Somerset Council
Keynsham Civic Centre
Market Walk
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Dear Ms Kearney-Knowles

Focused visit to Bath and North East Somerset children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Bath and North East Somerset children's services on 4 and 5 December 2024. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Monique Lindsay and Anna Gravelle.

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

- The quality of support for the most vulnerable care leavers.
- Transition, planning and preparing for adulthood.
- Staying close and in touch.
- The impact of leaders on practice with care leavers.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. Inspectors considered a broad range of evidence, including from care leavers' individual records, and discussions with care leavers' personal advisers and social workers and their managers. Inspectors reviewed relevant local authority performance and quality assurance information, and spoke to senior leaders and other professionals, including the Lifelong links coordinator and the headteacher of the virtual school. Inspectors also spoke to care leavers.

Headline findings

Care leavers are supported well into adulthood. Trusting relationships with their social workers and personal advisers help young people to make progress and to have positive experiences. Leaders have a good understanding of practice with young people, including strengths and areas for development. The workforce and the council's senior leadership have demonstrated their commitment to getting services right for care leavers. Leaders' consistent focus on strengthening performance has led to further development since the last inspection. A recognition that there is always more to do reflects their ambitions for young people.

Main findings

Leaders have continued to focus on improving the experiences of care leavers since the last inspection. They have committed corporate and political investment and prioritised care leavers across the service. The local authority continues to value the involvement of young people in shaping its services. Corporate leaders and elected members have made leaving care a protected characteristic, and signed up to the Care Leaver Covenant.

The culture and warmth of the council are a strength. Staff feel exceptionally well supported by their managers and enjoy working in this local authority. A stable leadership team and workforce mean that young people benefit from enduring relationships with people who care for them and about them.

Managers provide effective guidance and support for frontline staff. They are visible and available when workers need them. Staff describe their workloads as manageable, with supportive colleagues who work well together. Leaders have grown the care-experienced team to accommodate an increase in demand and to provide greater capacity for intensive support for young people who are vulnerable.

Investment in training provides staff with the skills and knowledge they need to fulfil their roles effectively. Workers find the systemic training helps them to consider the wider context when working with children and young people. Personal advisers particularly value the specialist training the authority has funded specifically for them. They have found it helpful in supporting them in their work, and appreciate the level 4 qualification it provides.

Practice with care leavers is mostly thorough. Needs assessments for young people are strong, and the effective use of 'social graces' supports a good understanding about their unique identities.

A well-set-out quality assurance framework provides leaders and managers with an accurate overview of the quality of practice. Audits are sensitively written and rightly focused on the experiences of the young person. Not all audits are wholly collaborative, and the absence of practitioner feedback in some examples limits insights into operational challenges and in closing the learning loop and evidencing impact on frontline practice.

Supervision is generally detailed and reflective. In a small number of situations, supervision records are too brief to capture the reflective discussions taking place or the learning identified through audits.

Most care leavers have a well-established relationship with their personal adviser and they want to keep in touch. Older care leavers can opt out of support from a named worker, but continue to access services from the care-experienced team as and when they need support. When care leavers have not had recent contact, this is

mainly due to the young person not responding to concerted attempts made by their personal advisers.

Care leavers are supported to understand their journeys into and through care. Personal advisers are warm and driven to make sure care leavers are helped to navigate their way through complex emotional trauma. Practitioners know the children and young adults they are supporting well. Care leavers' views are sought by the practitioners and this is reflected in the work undertaken with them. They speak positively and with pride and care about young people, and can describe their individual needs and interests.

Care leavers are helped by workers who advocate strongly for them and who support them to achieve their best outcomes. Young people said that they feel supported and held by their personal advisers and that senior leaders listen to them.

Transitions for care leavers to the leaving care teams are well managed. Targeted early planning, supported by joint supervision for the social worker and personal adviser, enables young people to develop long-standing and trusting relationships with their personal advisers. Care-experienced young people are supported beyond the age of 21 if they, in discussion with their personal adviser, agree this is needed.

Care leavers' pathway plans are purposeful and detailed. They routinely include the input of other agencies and most are timely. Most are co-produced with young people, and they reflect their needs well. Stronger plans recognise and respond particularly well to young people's risks and vulnerabilities. Most plans address key areas such as health, education, employment and identity.

Care leavers receive support that is effective from professionals who work closely together. Therapeutic services are provided when needed. Care leavers also benefit from additional support from advocacy services, ensuring that their views are independently heard. Health histories are routinely shared with young people. Personal advisers provide effective advice and help when young people wish to access their records.

Practitioner support for the most vulnerable care leavers is mostly strong. Risk is understood well and factors that impact on the young person's safety and well-being are thoroughly explored. Care leavers with additional vulnerabilities receive early support to stop their situations escalating. Young people who have significant mental health needs receive good support from professionals who work closely together.

Planning and decision-making for care leavers are underpinned by the authority's systemic practice model. Practitioners understand the trauma-informed approach and consistently write sensitively and with kindness to young people.

Most care leavers are living in suitable accommodation where they feel safe and have access to the support they need. They are given practical and financial help to

ensure they have the resources and knowledge they need to live independently. Personal advisers proactively support the small number of care leavers who are living in unsuitable accommodation.

Care leavers who are parents or who are expecting a baby are supported practically, financially and emotionally to prepare for caring for their children. Personal advisers have a thorough understanding of the challenges these young people are facing. They work collaboratively with the child's social worker, helping to support young parents and to safeguard their children.

Care leavers know their rights and the services to which they are entitled. The local offer is robust and well received, and pathway plans and case records provide evidence that the local offer has been shared with care leavers. Their access to support is being widened through a new app that young people are using.

Care leavers are helped to maintain relationships with their families when appropriate, and to develop wider support networks. An embedded lifelong links approach is re-establishing relationships for young people. Personal advisers use family group conferences that are helping young people rebuild family relationships, for example, in helping young parents to care for their children.

Care leavers who are former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are exceptionally well supported with their mental health and diverse needs. Personal advisers understand these young people's experiences and the support that they require. They recognise the challenge of settling into the local area and support young people to move to be nearer friends and familiar communities when this is in their best interests.

Young people are encouraged by their personal advisers to fulfil their ambitions through study or work. A training and employment mentor has a wealth of networks and links to ensure the best opportunities for care leavers. The headteacher of the virtual school and the post-16 education coordinator are highly ambitious for care leavers. They have helped to strengthen capacity through joint working with Bath College to provide English for Speakers of Other Languages courses. The trauma-informed guide has supported other local colleges to respond effectively to keep young people engaged in their education.

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

Yours sincerely

Monique Lindsay
His Majesty's Inspector