

Ofsted  
Piccadilly Gate  
Store Street  
Manchester  
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231  
**Textphone** 0161 618 8524  
[enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)  
[www.gov.uk/ofsted](http://www.gov.uk/ofsted)



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Jon Abbey  
Corporate Director, Children's Services  
Islington Council  
222 Upper Street  
London N1 1XR

Dear Jon

### **Focused visit to Islington local authority children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Islington local authority children's services on 19 and 20 October 2022. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Brenda McLaughlin and Naintara Khosla.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for care experienced children and young people (care leavers).

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

### **Headline findings**

Care experienced children and young people in Islington benefit from teams of highly committed, ambitious and determined professionals who work extremely well together, helping the children and young people to remain safe and to achieve in life. Strong collaborative work with partner agencies is reflected through shared corporate priorities in strategic plans. This is underpinned by dynamic quality assurance processes that are driving continuous improvement.

Most pathway plans strongly reflect the voice of the young person and sensitively explain the complexity of the issues that they face. Excellent support from staff at the virtual school helps children and young people to find and sustain purposeful work, education or training. Innovative work with housing has resulted in the provision of safe and stable accommodation for young people. Emotional and mental well-being services offer swift interventions at various levels, depending on the assessed needs of the young person. Purposeful tailored support provided by multidisciplinary teams for children at risk of criminal and sexual exploitation is helping to make children safer. Corporate parenting arrangements are exceptionally strong, and priorities are informed by the views of care experienced children and young people. Highly effective partnership collaboration ensures that children with additional needs experience a seamless transition to adult services. Supervision records do not consistently record requisite actions or align them to findings from audits.

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

- Consistently evaluate, record and update actions in supervision, taking account of findings from case audits.

### **Main findings**

Exceptional and aspirational corporate and operational leaders work together to listen to care experienced young people, to understand their world and to act on their views. A stable leadership team and an ambitious vision driven by the chief executive officer (CEO) and the lead member for children are key factors in their success. Their passion to do the 'right thing' and a tangible commitment to 'lifelong corporate parenting' have created a culture of high challenge and support. Most staff at all levels consistently provide high-quality young adult-centred services.

Islington's motivational practice model ensures that all staff and many partner agencies provide trauma-informed assessments. Young people's advisers (YPAs) and social workers work conscientiously, listening to care experienced children and building nurturing and valuable relationships with them. Consequently, practitioners understand young people's complex early experiences and tailor their interventions accordingly, leading to better outcomes for most young people.

Young people are effusive about Independent Futures, Islington's leaving care service. They appreciate and value the relationships that they have with their workers, who are responsive and provide 'help in the moment' when it is needed most. One young person said: 'I have no words to describe what my worker does to help me.' The genuine warmth of staff and their affection and pride in children's progress and achievements are evident in their direct work and frequent contact and visits. Social workers and YPAs are steadfast during young people's setbacks and times of challenge. They actively work to stay in touch. This promotes reciprocal and trusting relationships within a safe, therapeutic practice culture, enhanced by joint work with accessible mental health clinicians and housing services.

A localised approach to commissioning housing support means that young people can maintain local links and have access to important local services, such as colleges, employment and training opportunities that will support them to achieve independence. The instigation of the House Project came from the influential care experienced 'children's active involvement service'. This has assisted young people to move permanently into their own homes. Working with the corporate parenting board and with the help of leaders, the House Project has transformed young people's readiness for independence. A well-established 'housing pathway' allows care experienced young people to receive care within their accommodation setting at either low, medium or high support. A specialist housing officer for young people coordinates all housing nominations, working in close partnership with Independent Futures, specialist health services, youth justice and community safety officers. Young people only move into their own properties when they are considered ready to do so, and as a result, tenancy breakdowns are very infrequent. Inspectors spoke to

representatives from the House Project during this visit. Young people were participating in a national conference in Manchester, presenting their impressive work to professionals about what they have achieved in Islington.

The rapidly changing profile of children in care is understood through pre-emptive multi-agency planning. A significant increase in the number of separated asylum-seeking children entering care and a relatively high percentage of older children in care present specific challenges. For instance, due to the unprecedented demand, children's services are working hard to ensure that children who have been wrongfully placed in adult asylum hotels are assessed and safeguarded quickly. To meet this essential but resource-heavy work, managers have continuously adapted by providing bespoke good practice training to staff.

Islington provides timely care for all unaccompanied children that are found within the local authority boundaries. Children's safety is treated as a priority and they are provided with the same quality of support as all care experienced children. This includes appropriate accommodation that meets individual needs, and they are given access to education, including bespoke English lessons by the virtual school. A relentless focus to access appropriate legal representation, as well as liaison with the Home Office to progress immigration status, reduces children's anxiety. Social workers and managers work consistently to provide emotional reassurance. This is achieved by regular communication and by providing positive life experiences, through bespoke funding. Young people are encouraged to access local, culturally aligned community groups and access resources provided by Independent Futures, including the House Project, while they await their immigration decisions.

Committed YPAs are persistent in their efforts to engage and support care experienced children to achieve their goals. Pathway plans are comprehensive, and although the quality does vary, they provide clarity on the local offer and are reviewed regularly in consultation with the child or young person. Plans carefully explore next steps needed to support children and young people towards greater independence. Tenacious, respectful work by YPAs helps children and young people to manage their priorities and expectations; they receive sensitive support to help them to develop independent living skills. These skills are closely evaluated before young people are nominated for final-stage independent housing. Swift access to independent advocates and Islington's award-winning Grandmentors scheme provides care experienced children with objective help or the opportunity to raise concerns about their individual needs if required.

Care leavers receive exceptional support from the virtual school's headteacher and the advisory and progression teachers, leading to purposeful work, education and training. The team has an intensive focus on improving education, employment and training (EET) for all young people, including those in custody. The council's extension of its EET offer is part of its wider corporate parenting role. The local authority participates in a Department for Education pilot programme to extend the pupil premium to all care experienced young people. This has been used well to

develop the tracking of young people in further education colleges and subsequently their attendance has increased substantially. The virtual headteacher has been involved in training staff in a further education college, assisting them to improve their tracking of attainment. An EET panel meets every six weeks to monitor all children at risk; this has helped them to prioritise, anticipate problems and find solutions to keep children and young people in school or college. Two dedicated EET advisers work intensively with young people identified as being at risk and all children and young people aged 16 to 18 years old are allocated an advisory teacher.

Young people from ages 18 to 25 benefit from bespoke and focused work, wherever they live. Virtual school staff routinely compile and review personal education plans (PEPs). Assiduous work by the virtual school staff to develop good relationships across other local authorities, with other professionals, schools and colleges, helps to bring early solutions. The co-location of the virtual school alongside social work teams means that advisory teachers know children well, including their experiences and the impact of trauma. Information, advice and consultation are available to YPAs and social workers every day. Staff at the virtual school have access to the local authority recording systems and provide information to statutory reviews and pathway plans and planning.

Robust systems are used to oversee children with education, health and care plans. Individual education plans and PEPs are reviewed termly by the advisory teachers, who chair these meetings and monitor progress between reviews. The reporting, analysis and understanding of individual needs are underpinned by reliable live data and reinforced by knowing the unique complexities that care experienced children face. This data is used effectively to continuously drive improvement across services. A corporate task and finish group, chaired by the CEO and including the virtual school, brings challenge to all council departments to provide work experience and internships specifically for care leavers. Senior leaders, including directors, are individually involved in mentoring young people. There is a plan to ring-fence the apprentice scheme across the council for care experienced children.

Children's physical, emotional and mental health needs are closely monitored by the dedicated Independent Futures teams. An integrated approach working alongside co-located mental health clinicians and a wide range of commissioned emotional health services extends to all care experienced young people beyond the age of 18. This includes physical and sexual health, providing care experienced young people with easy access to healthcare, and a 'drop in' at the time that they need it. Mental well-being services offer support at various levels, depending on the assessed needs of young people. For example, the Brandon Centre offers counselling or more intensive support by clinicians as necessary without stigma; 52 young people have been able to access the mental health services. There is a bespoke provision for young parents to support them, as well as the PAUSE programme, which is helping to reduce further teenage pregnancies.

Transition planning for care experienced children with complex needs is strong. A transitions 'pathway' provides clarity on access to adult social care. This includes those young people with autism, mental health needs and sensory and physical impairments. A dedicated team was made substantive in April 2022 and maximises capacity by exploring options at an early stage. The CEO, working with the lead member for children on her ambitious 'Corporate Parenting for Life Manifesto Pledge', has started work with partners in neighbouring boroughs and Islington mental health trust, securing priority access for young care experienced adults.

Effective proactive joint work by Young Islington's youth services, the police and other partners is reducing the criminalisation of care experienced children. Islington's joint multi-agency protocol recognises that young people with adverse childhood experiences are more likely to exhibit challenging behaviour, make negative choices and be involved with the criminal justice system. A commitment to listening to children and challenging discrimination helps to ensure that children's lived experiences are constantly central to decisions.

A rigorous, strengths-based performance and quality assurance audit framework, augmented by a culture of professional accountability and respectful challenge, ensures that leaders have a comprehensive knowledge about the quality of work with care experienced children. Supervision is regular but agreed actions are not routinely recorded, reviewed and updated in subsequent sessions and evaluated against the findings from case audits.

Staff report that they feel valued by their managers. For instance, secondary trauma is recognised, and staff are supported to discuss the impact of their work and talk about their feelings in group supervision meetings. This improves and supports practitioners' emotional health and well-being. Good opportunities for development, training and promotion are increasing the number of staff transferring from agency to permanent contracts. Skilled social workers and YPAs are appropriately proud of their work. Staff know their care experienced children and young people very well, and movingly described the exemplary work that they consistently undertake.

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

Yours sincerely

Brenda McLaughlin  
**His Majesty's Inspector**