

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
Textphone 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/ofsted



22 June 2023

Theresa Leavy
Executive Director of People
County Hall
Colliton Park
Dorchester
DT1 1XJ

Dear Ms Leavy

Focused visit to Dorset children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Dorset children's services on 17 and 18 May 2023. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Tracey Ledder and Joy Howick.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for 16- and 17-year-old care leavers.

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

Headline findings

Leaders have significantly strengthened support and services for care leavers and have made notable improvements in the quality and standard of their accommodation. This was an area for development at the last inspection.

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

- The quality and timeliness of supervision.

Main findings

Care leavers receive strong and effective support and have access to a wide range of specialist services. Each young person is helped by a skilled and dedicated personal adviser. Many personal advisers care about, and have empathy for, the young people they work with. Mostly, they know their young people well. They are proud of young people's achievements and champion their aspirations. They are there for young people when they most need them.

Young people's records and plans are mostly in line with their circumstances. Young people are encouraged to help complete these documents. When this happens, records capture the voice, wishes and feelings of young people well.

The local offer for care leavers is strong and continues to grow and develop. Personal advisers are proud to be able to deliver a plethora of services to help and support young people. There is a determination to make the offer even stronger. A small number of young people are disadvantaged in respect of council tax relief, this is because they live out of the local authority area or live with partners or in shared accommodation. As a result of this visit, leaders have committed to revisiting their policies to ensure equity across the whole care-experienced population, regardless of where care leavers live or who they live with.

Leaders make sure that children in their care are allocated a personal adviser at 16 years old. This is a relatively new and positive change to practice. It means that as children move towards leaving care, they are supported by both their social worker and personal adviser. As a result, care leavers are starting to benefit from thorough and coordinated transitions that provide the bedrock for advisers to be able to support care leavers well. This approach enables relationships to develop with care leavers sooner. For a very small number of children, the transition process could be strengthened by the attendance of advisers at important meetings when they should be.

Personal advisers help care leavers to access education, employment or training. When young people are not engaged, they have input from the headteacher of the virtual school and from other agencies. Young people are encouraged to undertake other educational activities while looking for employment or waiting for the academic year to begin. Strong collaboration between partner agencies ensures that these young people are tracked and monitored so that they can be supported to make future choices that are right for them.

Joint ventures between the local authority and employers are under way to help young people into employment that is right for them, with employers who understand them and the possible challenges they face. As a result, care leavers are being provided with tailored employment opportunities.

Recent changes to the frequency of visiting means that most care leavers are now being seen at least every eight weeks. Also, when young people need more support, visiting frequency increases in line with their needs.

Collaborative and effective arrangements with partner agencies underpin a wide range of services that protect children effectively. Frontline staff seek to learn and improve safeguarding services, which is helping to keep children and young people safer.

Services that have been developed to combat and reduce exploitation are particularly impressive. These community-based approaches, to develop 'safer locations' for young people, are supported by members of the community. For example, the impressive 'Pineapple Project' supports young women who have experience of

criminal and sexual exploitation. The young women have designed an exploitation tool kit and training programme for members of the community. This provides clear guidance on how to keep young people safe in their location. This has successfully been delivered to local businesses.

Care leavers have access to the health services they need. Proactive collaboration with adult services and other partner agencies helps to smooth transitions for young people into adult services and help is provided at the earliest point. This has proved successful as young people receive timely health assessments, and medicals for unaccompanied children seeking asylum designed to meet their particular needs. For example, speedy assessments considering trauma are leading to swifter intervention.

Not all young people have regular dental checks. Leaders are working with health partners to try and resolve this issue. In the interim, a small number of young people are not receiving the service they require.

There is a focus on strengthening mental health services for young people. The current remodelling of mental health services is looking to create pathways that provide quicker access. In the interim, the local authority is seeking to provide the right level of wraparound services. When required, specialist services, for example, drug and alcohol services, are commissioned from the voluntary sector.

Personal advisers benefit from managers who are readily accessible. Most advisers find supervision helpful and supportive, however, records of supervision are not always in line with the local authority's own policy in relation to frequency and content. Most do not provide clarity about what needs to happen for young people or by when. For some advisers, gaps between supervisions are too long. As a result, young people's progress is not always monitored as effectively as it could be. Leaders are aware of this, as it is a concern identified through their own case file auditing. Leaders have invested in additional training for managers to address this.

Leaders are continuing to reduce caseloads and have brought in additional capacity to the care leavers' service. Almost all personal advisers have manageable caseloads, however a very small number report that their workloads are not always manageable. They said that this can prevent them providing all young people with the support they need and in an equitable way.

Part of the additional capacity that leaders have introduced is aimed at supporting care leavers with additional vulnerabilities, for example, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Leaders have created a specialist management post to oversee targeted and expert support and help. This is a relatively new development and consequently its impact is not yet evident in practice. However, the vision is clear.

Senior leaders know the strengths and weaknesses of their service well. Since the previous inspection, they have focused on improving the help and support that care leavers receive. These improvements are underpinned by effective consultation with

young people. Leaders have listened to young people about their experiences and acted to improve practice and services.

Together, leaders and care leavers help staff, partners and political members to understand their corporate responsibilities. Care leavers have produced and delivered training to help with this learning. Because of this approach, children and young people are at the heart of practice.

Leaders are now extending their collaborative approach to the local community and engaging them to provide support to the children and young people of Dorset. While it is early days, there are some positive initiatives under way. For example, leaders understand that care leavers may not have people to call on to help with day-to-day tasks, such as DIY, and some young people have already had help from members of their community. Leaders in Dorset are asking the community to step up.

Positive strides have been taken since the last inspection in respect of housing and accommodation for care leavers. Young people are benefiting from a focused management and corporate approach to ensure that they live in suitable housing. Very few live in unsuitable accommodation. If, or when, they do, there are systems to ensure that additional management oversight is in place. This helps to ensure that more appropriate housing is provided as quickly as possible. Improved relationships and joint working with partner agencies, alongside working agreements with housing services and organisations, mean that young people receive timely services should they become homeless or be at risk of homelessness.

The quality and supply of housing for care leavers is firmly on the local authority's agenda. A new independent housing project offers homes for up to 12 care leavers with peer landlords, providing a new type of support for young people. In return, the peer landlords receive financial reward. In addition, the project has personal advisers who work in their office, meaning that advice and help is on hand, not only for tenants but for young people in the local community. Plans are also under way in respect of supported accommodation ahead of the changes in regulation later in the year. Leaders have also strengthened staying put and staying close arrangements. Work is under way with private landlords, using a range of creative approaches, to build relationships to help care leavers obtain tenancies. The positive impact of all these initiatives is already evident.

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

Yours sincerely

Tracey Ledder
His Majesty's Inspector