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Dear Mr Jones

Focused visit to Knowsley children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Knowsley children's services on 31 January and 1 February 2024. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Rebekah Tucker and Russel Breyer.

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

- support into adulthood
- quality and suitability of accommodation
- employment, education and training
- staying close and in touch
- care leavers with specific needs (for example, unaccompanied asylum seekers, young parents or those who have had contact with the criminal justice system).

Throughout this letter, care leavers are referred to as care-experienced young people because this is the preferred term in the local authority.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. A range of evidence was considered, including electronic records, performance management information, case file audits and other information provided by senior managers. In addition, inspectors spoke to care-experienced young people, social workers and personal advisers.

Headline findings

This was the second focused visit since the full inspection of children's services in October 2021, when the quality and impact of the support provided to care-experienced young people was identified as an area for improvement.

Following the last inspection, senior leaders commissioned an external review of the care-experienced service in June 2022, which provided leaders with a comprehensive understanding of the areas for improvement. While some progress has been seen in relation to service development and corporate parenting for care-experienced young people, the quality of practice is too variable. For some young people, their needs and outcomes are well met, they are kept safe and they make appropriate progress. However, for a small number of young people, there is a lack of management oversight, and drift and delay in implementing effective pathway plans, to meet their needs.

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

- The quality and review of pathway plans.
- The quality and frequency of supervision and management oversight.
- The level of quality assurance activity, including the impact of the audit function on practice improvement.

Main findings

For most 16- and 17-year-olds, who are about to move out of care, their social workers have a good understanding of the risks that they can be exposed to and take effective action to safeguard them and promote their safety.

Pathway plans are of variable quality for children aged 16 and 17. Some plans are clear and show that focused direct work is undertaken to support individual needs. However, a small number of children do not have up-to-date pathway plans, which means that records do not always reflect current needs.

Most children aged 16 and 17 are allocated a personal adviser, which leads to the establishment of meaningful relationships before their transition to the care-experienced service when they turn 18.

Most personal advisers make frequent visits, in line with care-experienced young people's needs. Personal advisers are persistent in maintaining contact, using various methods to support young people's well-being and safety at times of crisis. However, for some care-experienced young people, there have been significant gaps in face-to-face contact, compromising the quality and impact of the assessment of their ongoing levels of need.

Most personal advisers in the care-experienced service are alert to issues of exploitation, and the risks associated with poor mental health and wider learning

needs. Personal advisers provide additional support for care-experienced young people when it is appropriate to do so. However, for a very small number of high-risk care-experienced young people who live in bed and breakfast accommodation, there has been a lack of management oversight. This has meant that vulnerabilities and risks of exploitation have increased, because plans have not been reviewed or sufficiently progressed.

Personal advisers keep in touch with most care-experienced young people aged 21 to 25 and have established strong relationships with them. These care-experienced young people continue to receive support from their personal advisers, should they still have a need to do so, and when they clearly express a wish for the support to continue. However, for a small number of young people, decisions by the team manager and personal advisers to end their involvement with the young people have not always been taken in consultation with them.

The quality of pathway plans for care-experienced young people is too variable. Some are written in collaboration with young people, to support them to understand their progress and identify any risks of harm. For most young people who are unaccompanied asylum seekers, or care-experienced young people in custody, pathway plans are clear and comprehensive. They address their needs and are kept up to date. For other young people, pathway plans are incomplete. They are not specific enough to support these young people's understanding of the help that they will receive. Some plans are not routinely updated in a timely manner, or when there has been a significant change in the young person's circumstances. These incomplete plans often lack management oversight. Senior leaders acknowledge that there have been some systems issues which have impacted on the quality of recording in this area of practice.

Pathway plans for young people aged 21 and over are of poor quality. They are limited in their content and consideration of need, and they lack management oversight and review. Some pathway plans are significantly out of date. Added to this, some young people do not have copies of their pathway plans.

Most children aged 16 and 17 are engaged in education. The progress of these children is reviewed regularly by the employment, education and training panel, and they are supported by employability practitioners. The virtual school supports this cohort well, enabling them to progress and to be ambitious. Personalised support is made available to help children successfully move on to higher education. For some care-experienced young people who are not in employment, education or training, personal advisers ensure that individualised programmes of support are available, with resources such as Catch 22 and Thrive being used effectively.

The health needs of most care-experienced young people are considered and met. Most are registered with general practitioners and dentists. They can access effective emotional and mental health support in Knowsley, through the Polaris team. Typically, care-experienced young people have health passports that are shared with

them. This means that they have important information about their lives and they know where to access health advice in the future, should they need this.

In the main, care-experienced young people are living in accommodation that is safe and that supports their needs. When housing issues arise, personal advisers support young people to maintain their tenancies or help them move into more appropriate accommodation. A small number of young people with whom inspectors spoke said that they were concerned about the condition of their accommodation and the risk from violent crime in their local area. Senior leaders are alert to this concern and are addressing this through improvements in the local offer. They acknowledge that there is more work to do in this area, both within the strategic partnership and in the wider corporate parenting function.

When young people are not ready to live independently, their care planning considers and supports them to stay with their former carers, under 'staying put' arrangements. For many, this supports them to maintain important relationships. It enables them to continue to benefit from, and enjoy, family life.

When young people who are unaccompanied asylum seekers leave care, they receive positive and skilled support from their personal advisers, including in their education, employment and training. Young people's health and emotional needs are met and their identity is well considered. Personal advisers recognise the importance of stability and they promptly secure appropriate legal advice, where appropriate, to support claims for asylum.

For most care-experienced young people who are in custody, personal advisers maintain regular contact. As a result, they understand the risks to them from gangs or other risks related to criminality, and these are considered in planning for their safe release. Most young people in custody are supported to access courses that will help them to find future employment, and there is an appropriately focused joint approach with housing and the probation service to identify suitable accommodation.

Personal advisers make persistent efforts to engage and work with most care-experienced young people who are parents. Personal advisers have good relationships with young parents and they maintain regular contact. Most care-experienced young parents are living in suitable accommodation that is safe and, meeting their needs, and those of their children.

Since the last inspection, an external review has been completed in relation to the experience and progress of care-experienced young people. This review informed the development of an updated care-experienced strategy. It also helped leaders to ensure that there was an increased focus on the needs of care-experienced young people in the children's services improvement plan. Senior leaders have since worked closely with partners to develop services for care-experienced young people. This has led to care-experienced young people being given priority access to housing

tenancies, the growth of the virtual school's 16-plus role, and the development of emotional well-being services through the Polaris team.

In addition, the local offer to care-experienced young people has been strengthened. Digital inclusion has been developed further through the provision of laptops and phones to all those who need them. Full council tax support, leisure passes and driving lessons, are just some of the elements contained in the revised local offer. The creation of the 'councillors' fund' by elected members, who have given their annual pay rise to support care-experienced young people, demonstrates a commitment to the corporate parenting role into adulthood. Care-experienced young people have also had their status recognised as a protected characteristic.

Despite these improvements, some personal advisers are not aware of the detail of the local offer. This means that some young people are not fully supported to understand it and they do not access what they are entitled to. The local offer has not been discussed with some children aged 16 and 17 and some care-experienced young people. For some care-experienced young people with additional levels of need, accessibility to the local offer is limited.

The recent changes in the senior management team, including at service manager and team manager level, have hindered the pace of progress in this area of practice. This has resulted in a lack of stability, and insufficient management oversight, impacting on the experience and progress of care-experienced young people.

The caseloads of personal advisers are too high. Although personal advisers report that caseloads are manageable, some are unable to complete tasks on time and meet all young people's needs on a daily basis, including having purposeful and regular contact with them.

Personal advisers do not always receive regular supervision. There are significant gaps in supervision for most personal advisers, and for a small number this is greater than a year. The quality of supervision is also variable. Most recorded actions are brief, task focused and are not consistently timebound, which means that plans for young people are not routinely driven forward to effect change in a timely way. There is an absence of reflection, professional challenge, and accountability for poor practice in supervision records. This was acknowledged by senior leaders during the visit, who stated that staffing changes have impacted on the quality of practice in this area.

The senior management team responsible for care-experienced young people has experienced some instability and change in recent months. This has led to a low level of quality assurance activity, a lack of robust management oversight of young people's plans and infrequent supervision for personal advisers. This means that senior leaders do not always know about the quality of practice or the impact of the local authority's improvement work on outcomes for young people.

The quality assurance framework is not embedded in this area of practice and audit activity has been low in the last six months. The quality assurance tools used, do not support, or complement each other in driving practice improvements. Some of the quality assurance tools used are more impactful than others. There is an absence of moderation, reflective reviews or demonstrable consultations with young people and their families, and inconsistent collaboration with practitioners. Most audits are not reviewed or signed off by managers. Although the audit process does include a 'closing the loop' mechanism, this was not embedded effectively in practice to ensure that learning leads to purposeful change. Consequently, this is not supporting the improvement of practice and positive outcomes for care-experienced young people. Senior leaders acknowledged during the visit that the pace of improvement needs to accelerate. They recognise that there is more work to do in this area to ensure that care-experienced young people in Knowsley receive a consistently good service.

Staff said they feel supported in their training and career aspirations, and that they really enjoy working for Knowsley Council. A new director of children's services has taken up post in recent weeks following the retirement of the previous post holder. He is determined to make the necessary improvements, as highlighted during the visit.

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

Yours sincerely

Rebekah Tucker
His Majesty's Inspector