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Dear Ms Dutton

Focused visit to Wigan children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Wigan children's services on 29 and 30 October 2024. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Sophie Wales and Teresa Godfrey.

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

- The quality of planning for care leavers.
- Quality and suitability of accommodation.
- Staying close and in touch.
- 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 care leavers' individual records, and had case discussions with personal advisers and managers. Inspectors also spoke to care leavers. Inspectors reviewed relevant local authority performance and quality assurance information.

Headline findings

By their actions, leaders have shown consistent and strong ambition for care leavers to achieve. Significant financial investment by the local authority and partners means care leavers experience a comprehensive local offer and benefit from increased resourcing into the service through increased personal adviser and management capacity and investment to develop the care leaver hub.

Leaders have welcomed external scrutiny and challenge. They have had a consistent focus on strengthening the oversight of performance and quality assurance, which

has led to a good understanding of areas for improvement and service strengths. Leaders have already recognised there is more to do to establish effective supervision, robust management oversight and thorough case recording across the care leaving service to ensure reflection, case direction and decision-making.

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

- Management oversight and quality of supervision.
- Consistency and quality of recording.
- Proactive visiting and support for some care leavers.

Main findings

Personal advisers are in regular touch with young people. They speak about young people with pride, knowledge, understanding and care. They are able to describe their individual needs and interests and, importantly, understand their journey into and through care.

Pathway plans are written sensitively and clearly to the young person. Stronger plans recognise and respond well to young people's risks and vulnerabilities.

Plans are not always updated when significant events occur, which means they do not always reflect the most current situation for young people and records are not always up to date. Leaders are aware of this and have plans in place to address this.

Plans mostly address key areas such as health, education, employment and identity. When young people turn 21, there is more discretion about what areas of the plan are completed. This is informed by the young person's wishes but can mean that, for some vulnerable young people, the written plan does not fully reflect the support being provided.

Most plans set out realistic achievable targets in line with young people's wishes, feelings and level of development and capability. Actions in plans are linked to the young person's needs but do not always describe effectively how these can be met.

Mostly, young people are visited regularly. They are able to agree with their personal advisers where they would like their visits to take place. This means that they feel comfortable and can choose where and how they want to meet. For a small number of vulnerable young people, this means that their personal adviser has not visited them at home or seen their home for several months. Therefore, personal advisers may not be fully aware of young people's living arrangements and home environment. When visits take place, personal advisers record these clearly and capture young people's views well.

For some care leavers, there is too much onus on them to seek help or on being willing to accept it. Reflective discussions and management oversight do not always

capture how personal advisers and partner agencies can be more creative in engaging these young people.

Similarly, case records do not always reflect discussions that are held with managers about when and where young people should next be seen or when a follow up visit might be beneficial. They do not always capture contact which has taken place between visits. This hinders management oversight, as it is not clear from case records what level of support and contact is taking place.

Although management tools are now in place to support effective supervision, they are not consistently used to their full effect or having the impact they need to provide direction and oversight for workers. Senior leaders are aware of current shortfalls and have plans to further strengthen management oversight and the quality of supervision for staff, by increasing management capacity and supporting managers with bespoke supervision training.

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 support to ensure that they have the equipment and knowledge they need to live independently. When care leavers move into their own property, personal advisers ensure they are equipped to manage this successfully.

There is a tangible commitment by senior leaders to support care leavers to stay close and keep in touch. Care leavers are encouraged to maintain their positive relationships with people who know them and care for them. Personal advisers are sensitive to the risk of young people experiencing social isolation. Family and social networks are explored to help care leavers reconnect with wider family and their social networks, as well as accessing local community groups, but this is not consistently reflected in case records or plans.

The care leaver hub provides a sanctuary and support for young people where they are able to socialise, relax and learn new skills such as cooking and home care. Young people described the sense of connected family this gives them. This co-designed building provides a wealth of positive opportunities. In particular, young people describe the benefits of the partnership-funded emotional well-being support, alongside art therapy and wilderness sessions. Young people who attend The Hub have a greater connection with the service. This helps give workers a clearer understanding of their current experiences and progress.

Care leavers benefit from a comprehensive and bespoke local offer. For those whose first language is not English, the offer is translated. When personal advisers visit young people, they remind care leavers of their rights and entitlements under the local offer.

In the last year, the local authority has actively strengthened its offer to care leavers over 21 and they are supported in their decision to remain open to the service or

not. This means that most of those now leaving care can continue to benefit from active support when this is needed. For those to whom the service says 'goodbye for now', the authority is clear they can seek help again if needed.

Senior leaders are unrelenting in their ambition to help young people succeed and that the value of post-18 learning is well understood. More young people are in employment, education and training as a result. Leaders are tenacious in their efforts to support young people to gain employment or to access education or training. Cross-sector partnership working across the borough is providing a creative offer for young people in relation to training and employment opportunities. This has been developed with the interests and aspirations of young people at its centre.

Employers are helped to understand and overcome the barriers for care leavers to engage in training and employment. As a result, young people have opportunities to achieve qualifications and skills which equip them for future employment. Care leavers are encouraged to access higher education, including university, and when they do, they are financially supported.

Accurate performance information means that leaders have a strong understanding of the service. Senior leaders are strengthening their approach to quality assurance and performance and have broadened the range of quality assurance activities. This is supporting service improvement in ways which are making a difference to the lives of young people.

Audit activity is mostly effective, with purposeful moderation that is bringing challenge and scrutiny. When young people are engaged in the audit process, the impact and value of their input are evident, but this is not yet happening for all audits.

The local authority workforce training offer for personal advisers is comprehensive and detailed, and provides staff with the skills and knowledge they need for their roles. A stable leadership team and workforce means young people benefit from enduring relationships with people who care for them and about them.

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

Yours sincerely

Sophie Wales
His Majesty's Inspector