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Nigel Minns  
Strategic Director People  
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Market Square  
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Dear Mr Minns

### **Focused visit to Warwickshire County Council children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Warwickshire County Council children's services on 28 to 29 March 2023. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Andy Waugh and John Roughton.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for care-experienced young people.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. This visit was carried out entirely on site. Inspectors considered a broad range of evidence, including care-experienced young people's records, and undertook case discussions with personal assistants, social workers and managers. Inspectors spoke to a wide range of care-experienced young people. Inspectors also reviewed relevant local authority performance and quality assurance information.

### **Headline findings**

Since the last inspection in November 2021, when children's services were judged to be good overall, there has continued to be an effective focus on improving services for care-experienced young people by senior leaders, elected members, and partner agencies. Almost all care-experienced young people receive support and services that meet their needs effectively. Senior leaders have secured additional funding that has helped to increase the capacity and quality of responses across the service. These include five additional personal adviser posts, education officers, homelessness prevention officers and a mental health worker post. Additional apprenticeships made available across the whole local authority have continued to support young people in accessing employment and achieving their potential. The successful House Project has further expanded, supporting an additional 20 young people to live independently. Against a backdrop of financial pressures, competing demands for scarce resources and rising need, services have strengthened.

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

- The timeliness with which personal advisers are allocated.
- The effectiveness of management oversight of work with young people in custody and those living in unsuitable accommodation.

## **Main findings**

Care-experienced young people benefit from personal advisers and social workers who consistently build strong relationships with them. Personal advisers are aspirational for, and committed to improving the quality of life of, care-experienced young people. Personal advisers make frequent visits in line with care-experienced young people's needs. They are persistent in maintaining contact in between visits, using various methods to ensure that young people are safe and well. Personal advisers have developed relationships with some young people who have previously been hard to reach by offering consistent support and encouraging them to engage in activities. Care-experienced young people are positive about the service. They describe workers as caring and supportive and being there when they need them.

Most personal advisers are assigned to young people when they are 17. For a small number of young people this is too late, as this limits the time they have to build a trusting relationship with their personal adviser and to make a smooth transition into adulthood.

Care-experienced young people who were formerly unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive an exceptional service. Personal advisers ensure that their immediate needs are met and provide safe, suitable accommodation that meets their needs. Education support is of a high standard and interpreters and language courses are used effectively. This helps these young people to enhance their skills and supports them well in their daily lives. Personal advisers recognise the importance of stability and promptly secure appropriate legal advice when this is necessary. When applications have failed, they are tenacious in exhausting all options to support young people to remain in the country.

For care-experienced young people who are in custody, personal advisers maintain contact through regular visiting. Planning for their release often focuses narrowly on accommodation provision and lacks a more holistic approach to their needs. There is a lack of management oversight to ensure proactive planning for these care-experienced young people to support a positive rehabilitation into the community.

Pathway plans are well written and mostly co-produced with care-experienced young people, and consequently provide greater insight into their needs. Risks to care leavers are mostly well identified in their plans. Pathway plans are written in a manner that is accessible for most care-experienced young people and clearly identify what needs to happen next. They contain clear actions that are well matched to care-experienced young people's circumstances and needs. Pathway plans are

aspirational and support care-experienced young people to succeed. Health needs are well considered in pathway plans, with appropriate referrals being made to health partners. When young people are approaching 21, there are thoughtful discussions about the next stages for help and guidance. Care-experienced young people influence decisions about the continuing support they wish to receive. Pathway plan review meetings are held frequently and in line with care-experienced young people's changing circumstances and needs. Review meetings are chaired by an advanced practitioner, providing a helpful level of independence and scrutiny. Contingency planning could be stronger for a small number of care-experienced young people living in circumstances which are more unpredictable or potentially volatile.

Almost all care-experienced young people live in suitable accommodation which is safe and meets their needs. They have access to effective training and support to prepare them for independent living. Care-experienced young people are supported and encouraged to stay with their carers under 'staying put' arrangements after their 18th birthdays and until they are ready for independence. Personal advisers and contract managers work hard to support young people when they are at risk of losing their tenancy. As a result, only a very small number of care-experienced young people experience eviction. Since the last inspection, leaders have strengthened the commissioning and contract arrangements with providers. This has led to an increase in the availability of different types of accommodation provision for young people with higher support needs.

A small number of care-experienced young people live in unsuitable accommodation. Personal advisers maintain contact but there is a lack of sufficient management oversight or urgency to improve their living circumstances promptly.

Care-experienced young people benefit from the advice and guidance of dedicated careers support advisers to help them to achieve their potential. Care-experienced young people access a range of opportunities through drop-ins, residential stays, and day trips with the support of staff they trust, which helps to widen their horizons. Careers advisers work creatively with care-experienced young people and are committed to supporting them to achieve their potential. Apprenticeships are a high priority for leaders. Additional posts have been secured within the council, along with a commitment from the NHS for a further 25 opportunities. Most apprenticeships lead to permanent job opportunities. Care-experienced young people who attend university receive attractive financial packages to support them with the costs of living independently and maintaining accommodation while studying.

Care-experienced young people who were formerly unaccompanied asylum-seeking children have access to a dedicated specialist nurse who works closely with personal advisers in understanding young people's physical and emotional health needs. Careful consideration is given to the trauma experienced by this cohort of young people and emotional health services are offered sensitively to address any concerns. An innovative response to supporting these care-experienced young people with

sleep problems through workshops and 'better sleep' packs is much welcomed and has proven to be beneficial. Learning from this post is assisting in the development of a similar post for all care-experienced young people. At a strategic level, work is under way to review and strengthen the 18 to 25 offer with respect to mental and emotional health, in response to increasing need, and ensuring a smoother transition from care into post-18 support.

Care-experienced young people in Warwickshire benefit from a strong and comprehensive local offer that is accessible and used flexibly to respond to the developing needs of children as they leave care and move into independence. The local offer is co-produced with young people and well established. Young people have access to a range of tailored accommodation options, and support in accessing education and apprenticeships. Participation activities assist care-experienced young people in both enriching their own lives and in supporting the development of services. Most importantly, they seek meaningful consultation from care-experienced young people, which leads to services that are co-produced and supports young people to achieve their best outcomes. Through representation and oversight at the corporate parenting board, it is evident that the local authority and partner agencies are committed to improving the lives of young people.

Senior leaders have good insight into the strengths and areas for development in the care leavers service. The local authority welcomes, and makes effective use of, scrutiny and challenge from external sources. A comprehensive quality assurance and performance management framework provides leaders and managers with a robust overview of the standard of practice. There is an emphasis on the development of sustained relationship-based practice, which is clearly evidenced when speaking to both young people and staff. Learning from audits is shared at team and service level, helping to improve practice. Outcomes from audits themselves are not always turned into timebound actions to create further improvement, with a stronger focus on compliance.

Staff say that they feel well supported by senior leaders and managers. The stability of the workforce, along with manageable caseloads, means that personal advisers have the opportunity to build positive and lasting relationships with care-experienced young people. They have access to a comprehensive training programme and are encouraged to attend courses on a regular basis. The strong commitment to young people and a culture of never giving up on them runs through the local authority, from personal advisers up to senior leaders.

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

Yours sincerely

Andy Waugh  
**His Majesty's Inspector**