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Dear Ms Hartley

Focused visit to Wirral children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Wirral children's services on 17 and 18 September 2024. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Rebekah Tucker and Lisa Walsh.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for care leavers. 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 first focused visit since the full inspection of children's services in September 2023, where the quality and impact of the support provided to care leavers was identified as one of the areas for improvement.

Following the last inspection, senior leaders commissioned independent reviews of children's services and the quality assurance framework to drive service improvement. Although it is too soon to see the impact of these reviews for children and young people, some progress has been seen since the inspection in relation to the transition arrangements for 16- and 17-year-olds, the provision of suitable accommodation, the complaints process and the accessibility of the local offer.

Despite these recent improvements, there is still some variability in the quality of practice. For some young people their needs are well met, risk is recognised and responded to appropriately and they make good progress. For other young people, there is limited management oversight, and their plans are not routinely updated.

For a significant number of care-experienced young people aged 21 to 25, their cases have been closed without due consultation or regular review of their support needs. Senior leaders acknowledged these significant shortfalls in practice and took immediate remedial action during the visit to ensure that care-experienced young people now receive a more effective level of support.

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

- The quality of support arrangements to keep in touch with care-experienced young people aged 21 to 25.
- The quality and frequency of supervision for personal advisers and management oversight.
- The level of quality assurance activity, including the impact of the audit function on practice improvement.

Main findings

Most 16- and 17-year-olds have the opportunity to get to know their personal adviser before they are 18. This gives personal advisers the chance to understand the young person's whole life history and to build a relationship with them, prior to the key transition to adulthood and the care-experienced service.

For most 16- and 17-year-olds, social workers have a good understanding of the risks that young people can be exposed to, and they take effective action to safeguard them and promote their safety. Pathway plans are usually of good quality and demonstrate creative and child-centred social work practice. Social workers know this cohort of young people well and visit them frequently, in accordance with their assessed needs.

When young disabled people transition to adult social care services, personal advisers act as conscientious parents, and provide appropriate guidance and support. Personal advisers work closely with adult social workers at the right pace for young people, supporting effective transitions to adulthood. This helps young people to develop their independence skills. Personal advisers challenge other professionals well, to address issues and concerns for young people and they make appropriate adult safeguarding referrals when vulnerabilities increase.

Most personal advisers make frequent visits to care-experienced young people, in line with their changing needs. Some young people meet with their personal advisers at the care-experienced hub, where they can also use the laundry, shop in the subsidised supermarket and use the computer suite. Personal advisers are persistent in maintaining contact and, resourceful in their methods, and this supports the well-being and safety of young people at times of crisis. When care-experienced young people are at increased risk, there is a strong multi-agency response to reduce the risk. The action plans for these young people are reviewed regularly and are responsive to their changing needs and risks.

The quality of pathway plans for care-experienced young people is variable. For most young people, including those who are unaccompanied asylum seekers, or care-experienced young people in custody, pathway plans are clear, comprehensive and kept up to date. For a small number of young people, pathway plans are not always updated with significant life events. They do not consistently include input from other agencies or consider the impact of the intervention for the young person. The voices of care-experienced young people are routinely captured in pathway plans, but it is not consistently clear how these views will shape their future plans. For unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people, copies of their pathway plans are not consistently shared with them in their first language. Senior leaders are aware of this issue and have taken appropriate steps to address it.

Most children aged 16 and 17, and care-experienced young people over 18, are engaged in education, employment or training. The strong and effective links between employability coaches, the virtual school and personal advisers, ensure that employment, education and training are prioritised. This collaboration enables personal advisers to motivate young people to achieve their academic or personal aspirations. As a result, young people are supported to pursue their goals, including attendance at college, work in specific areas, and access to apprenticeships. There is a strong offer when young people progress to further education, with financial support available to ensure that they can focus on their studies.

Some care-experienced young people who are not engaged in employment, education or training, benefit from tailored support made available through personal advisers, often working closely with employability coaches. Effective and aspirational pathway planning supports these young people to understand the barriers they face and provides effective strategies for how to overcome their individual challenges. Personal advisers and coaches often accompany young people to initial appointments with education providers.

Personal advisers support young people to ensure that their health needs are prioritised through access to both universal and specialist health services. Young people are encouraged to seek support for their emotional well-being, with personal advisers making referrals to appropriate services. Leaders have acknowledged that there is more work to do with care-experienced young people, to ensure that they have consistent access to their health histories.

Most care-experienced young people live in suitable accommodation that is safe and supports their needs. Personal advisers work hard to support young people to secure independent tenancies and to increase their opportunities for stability. Care-experienced young people benefit from priority housing banding, and a 100% council tax exemption when living in the borough.

When young people are not ready to live independently, they are encouraged to 'stay put' with their former carers. For many, this supports them to maintain important relationships and enables them to continue to benefit from, and enjoy, family life.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people are well supported, including in their education, employment or training. Young people's health and emotional needs are met by relevant partner agencies and their identity and cultural needs are well considered.

For most care-experienced young people who are in custody, personal advisers maintain regular contact with them, which supports good relationships to develop. Although most young people are supported by a multi-agency group of professionals, it is not always clear what plans have been put in place to help the young person prepare for release and to move away from criminality.

The quality and effectiveness of work with care-experienced young people who are parents are variable. Some personal advisers are aware of the additional vulnerabilities faced by young parents and ensure that their pathway plans appropriately consider their new lives as young parents and the impact of this for them, their partners, and their children. For other young parents, the level and effectiveness of personal adviser support were less clear in case records, and plans were out of date.

Care-experienced young people aged 21 to 25, are offered an ongoing service of help and support if they want and need this. This has included a duty service staffed by two personal advisers in the care-experienced young people's hub. During this visit, inspectors found a significant number of young people were opted out of this service and closed, without due consultation or review of their support needs. This cohort included some extremely vulnerable young people. Senior leaders now recognise the shortfalls in practice in this part of the service and took immediate action to address the vulnerabilities of this group of young people during the visit. All young people are now allocated to personal advisers to ensure that a reassessment of their needs can be swiftly undertaken.

Since the last inspection, leaders have developed appropriate plans for the care-experienced service, supported by an overall children's services improvement plan. Transition planning for children aged 16 and 17, and the accessibility of the local offer have improved. A charter for improved joint working between the children in care and care-experienced services has been established, and the care-leaver panel has been reviewed to include independent reviewing officers and housing colleagues. It is too soon to see the full impact of these new initiatives for all care-experienced young people. Although strategic and corporate commitment to care-experienced young people have been demonstrated in the uplift of the priority housing banding and a programme of apprenticeships in the local authority, there is still more work to do to ensure greater consistency of practice.

Most care-experienced young people are made aware of, and are supported to access, the wide and varied elements contained in the local offer, through discussions with their personal advisers and direction to online information. Personal advisers have a good awareness and understanding of the local offer, which is now available in the first language of all care leavers on request. Digital inclusion is

promoted through the availability of laptops at the care-experienced young people's hub and the provision of data packages at home. Leisure passes and driving lessons are also included in the local offer.

Some care-experienced young people told inspectors that they have experienced significant delays in gaining access to their children's social care records. Senior leaders accepted this needs to improve to ensure that young people have timely access to their personal information.

The quality and frequency of supervision for personal advisers is variable. Although some supervision records are detailed and reflective, others are descriptive, too compliance-focused and lack clear timescales. There are sometimes gaps in the frequency of supervision, which makes it difficult to measure timely outcomes for care-experienced young people.

The level of audit activity in the care-experienced service is low and the audit tool used does not consistently deliver improvements in practice. There is an absence of consistent moderation, reflective review and consultation with young people or their families, and collaboration with practitioners is variable. As such, the audit process is not sufficiently effective at 'closing the loop' to evidence practice learning. Senior leaders have acknowledged these shortfalls and have recently commissioned an external review of the quality assurance framework. A detailed plan is now in place, although it is too soon to see the impact of this for children and young people, practitioners, and the local authority.

Staff said that they enjoy working for Wirral Council. They said that they feel well supported and are able to manage their caseloads. A new director of children's services (DCS) has taken up post in the last six months. She has expressed a commitment to ensuring that the service receives the appropriate level of strategic oversight to support young people effectively. Staff told inspectors that they appreciate the DCS's approach in getting to know the care-experienced service.

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