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31 July 2025

David Haley  
Director of Children's Services Plymouth City Council  
Ballard House  
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Plymouth  
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Dear Mr Haley,

### **Focused visit to Plymouth children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Plymouth children's services on 1 and 2 July 2025. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Joy Howick, Monique Lindsay and Michele Henry.

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

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 advisers, social workers and managers. Inspectors spoke with a number of care-experienced young people. Inspectors also reviewed relevant local authority performance and quality assurance information.

### **Headline findings**

Plymouth City Council is an ambitious Corporate Parent, driven effectively by the Director of Children's Services. Senior leaders have secured many improvements for care-experienced young people in response to the areas for development identified in the previous inspection in February 2024, when the quality and consistency of services for care-experienced young people was judged to be requires improvement to be good.

Senior leaders have strengthened work with partner agencies. While this has resulted in improvements in many aspects of care-experienced young people's lives, it is too early to see the full impact of improvement plans in all aspects of their lives. The renewed focus on improvement via the 'One Council' approach to support young people has not yet been sufficiently effective in developing accommodation sufficiency for all care-experienced young people. The lack of a timely accommodation pathway with the housing department has meant that a small number of vulnerable care-experienced young people continue to be moved to live in bed and breakfast accommodation. This leaves the most vulnerable care-experienced

young people in a situation of heightened risk and this impacts on their sense of stability, emotional well-being and their life chances.

Leaders accept the findings of this visit and have agreed to take immediate action to improve the experiences of a small number of care-experience young people not living in permanent accommodation.

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

- The effectiveness of joint working across the council with housing to improve the quality and availability of accommodation for care leavers. (Enabler 1 national framework)
- The quality of supervision and management oversight, including the identification and management of risk. (Enabler 2 national framework)

### **Main findings**

Personal advisers (PAs) are introduced and allocated to children in care with sufficient time for children to get to know and build a trusting relationship with their PA. This helps to ensure that important plans for adulthood are started in good time.

Young people and their families told inspectors how much they value their PAs, saying that their PAs help them and stay alongside them, no matter what is going on in their lives. Young people describe their PAs as always being responsive and kind. They regularly refer to their PAs as 'family members' and many young people continue to remain in contact after they reach 25 years old, sharing their photos and news. Young people are supported to have a PA post their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. Those young people who choose not to remain in contact with their PA, including those aged 21 and over, still continue to receive regular updates and contacts. This means that young people, especially those who are vulnerable, always know that they can come back for support. This also provides an opportunity to ensure that these young people are fully aware of any new offers for care-experienced young people that have become available.

Care-experienced young people receive timely practical and emotional support from social workers and PAs who know them well. PAs and multi-agency professionals are ambitious for care-experienced young people and advocate strongly for them. Most PAs have a clear understanding of young people's journey into care and their support needs. PAs demonstrate a good understanding of safeguarding risks for care-experienced young people and act swiftly to educate them about risks to help reduce the risks.

Those at risk of exploitation are supported by the multi-agency 'Be Safe Team'. The team identify and address risks and set immediate actions to keep individual young people safe. The additional support of a specialist worker from the 'Be Safe Team'

has enhanced the persistent approach taken by all PAs in respect of risk. Young people are supported to be aware of their own safety by their PAs. Despite this, the focus on risk can sometimes get diluted as time passes. The level of risk is not always revisited sufficiently within the young person's supervision records to measure whether it has reduced or increased.

The quality of pathway plans has improved since the previous inspection. Care-experienced young people redesigned the template which has supported their engagement in completion of their plans, which now better reflects care-experienced young people's wishes. The plans are sensitively written and are co-produced with the young person.

PAs mostly record a thorough exploration of a young person's needs, showing curiosity about the issues that are impacting on them. PAs routinely update pathway plans. However, due to work pressures, this does not always happen in a timely way. Consequently, for some young people, there is a lack of clarity regarding the actions that need to be taken in response to their changing needs. While plans clearly capture young people's desires and are ambitious, there is still more improvement required in respect of detailed action setting. In stronger examples, the actions are clear for both the young person and professionals, providing the best opportunity of success for the young person.

PAs' written records of their visits have improved since the previous inspection. They show how well PAs know their young person. The records are written in a positive and trauma-informed style, providing an invaluable record for the young person about what has been happening for them in their lives.

The physical health needs of young people are well considered and well met. Care-experienced young people benefit from access to a flexible nursing team. The team supports young people to access the specific help they need, including mental health services. Leaders recognise that there is more to do to ensure that care-experienced young people have access to bespoke mental health support. A plan is in place to address this. Dental services for care-experienced young people is effective. This ensures that both routine care and emergency treatment are accessible for care-experienced young people, who are increasingly using these services. All young people receive a health passport from the nurses, which can be easily replaced if mislaid.

The Corporate Parenting Board provides effective governance and oversight of the council's work with care-experienced young people. Plymouth City Council has made available additional resources that have made positive differences for care-experienced young people. These important investment decisions have been guided by thoughtful and careful consultations with young people, using their views, for example, to determine future accommodation developments.

Since the previous inspection, the council has continued to strengthen the local offer to care-experienced young people. With full political support, this has become more comprehensive. Care-experienced young people, no matter where they live, are exempt from paying council tax, have leisure passes in Plymouth, which includes taking a friend at no cost, £200 worth of driving lessons, and a contribution to their water bills. Also, thoughtful items such as covering the cost of hiring a cap and gown and having a professional photo from a graduation ceremony are now fully funded, which provides an important memory for a celebratory stage in a young person's life.

Leaders have increased the range of support and programmes available to promote opportunities for care-experienced young people, which includes local employers. Positively, all care-experienced young people are automatically offered an interview for appropriate Plymouth City Council employment opportunities. Despite this, too many care-experienced young people remain not in employment, education or training (NEET).

When young people are NEET, the virtual school supports them to engage in learning opportunities in line with their wishes and interests. Senior managers recognise there is more to do to ensure that more care-experienced young people, and particularly those over 21 years of age who are NEET, are helped to develop the skills to support them into having the security of being in training, education or employment.

Care-experienced young people who are pregnant or parents continue to receive dedicated effective support. This has been further improved with a specialist service to help young parents succeed in their parenting, and reduce risks in meeting the needs of their children.

Senior leaders have used external scrutiny from a sector-led improvement partner to contribute to service-wide improvements. This has resulted in tangible improvements in the quality of support for care-experienced young people who were formally unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. A new dedicated team for these former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children has been created since the previous inspection. These specialist workers have the skills to develop trusting relationships to facilitate culturally sensitive direct work. They understand the needs of their young people and seek to find them the right place to live, and this means these young people live in accommodation that meets their needs. No matter how far away young people live, the same high quality of service is maintained to protect them and promote their welfare.

All young people in custody now receive regular visiting and support from their PAs. This is an improvement since the previous inspection. PAs advocate strongly on behalf of young people and help ensure that important family members and friends can visit the young person in custody. Despite these improvements, young people leaving custody do not benefit from suitable accommodation on their release. Rather, young people are required to present as homeless on release and tend to be placed

in bed and breakfast. This poor transition for these vulnerable young people into the community creates uncertainty and, in turn, increases the risks for them at this crucial time. Leaders accept these concerns and are taking immediate steps to address this to ensure that any young person leaving custody now moves into suitable accommodation.

Most young people benefit from access to a range of suitable housing options, including 'staying put' with carers. However, due to the lack of sufficient housing options, a very small number of care-experienced young people continue to move into bed and breakfast accommodation, before being able to move into a permanent home. Leaders are addressing this shortfall. A sustainable number of accommodation options for care-experienced young people are due to open imminently.

Senior leaders and managers are committed to continuous improvement in practice. The local authority's redesigned quality assurance framework provides managers with a thorough overview of the quality of practice as well as its impact on young people's experiences. The refreshed audit tool is effective at highlighting areas requiring improved practice. This means that, overall, senior leaders know their services well, as identified in their self-evaluation, which reflected what inspectors saw during the visit.

Audits provide an excellent opportunity for young people to talk about their experiences with managers. Young people are supported to review their records. All the young people that inspectors met made positive comments about their PAs, highlighting just how important they are in their lives. For example, one care leaver shared about her PA, 'She is amazing, I have no negatives about her, she is trying her best to get the right support for me.'

Senior leaders and managers have ensured that training and support have been provided to staff to continually improve practice. Some training has been delayed as PAs have high workloads, preventing them from undertaking training. Leaders are addressing this through a significant increase in both staff and management capacity.

PAs are very positive about working in Plymouth, despite very busy workloads. They are clear that their work environment has improved 'immeasurably' with a new culture of optimism, as a result of a Director of Children's Services who listens to them and is passionate about getting the right services for all care-experienced young people.

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

Yours sincerely

Joy Howick  
**His Majesty's Inspector**