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Dear Mr Coe

Focused visit to West Berkshire children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to West Berkshire children's services on 3 and 4 October 2023. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Amanda Maxwell and Michelle Woodward.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for care leavers. Specifically, they considered the quality and suitability of accommodation that young people live in. Inspectors looked at the support available to enable young people to access employment, education and training and how they are prepared for adulthood. Within this, inspectors also explored the experiences of care leavers with specific needs (for example, unaccompanied asylum seekers, young parents or those who have had contact with the criminal justice system).

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Headline findings

Care leavers in West Berkshire continue to be well supported by their personal advisers (PAs). They live in homes which they have chosen and feel safe in. Since the previous inspection in March 2022, there have been several changes within the corporate and political leadership of West Berkshire. The transfer to the new political leadership has been hindered by poor information-sharing. Senior leaders know of these challenges and have plans in place to address these matters. However, the impact of this is not evident.

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

- The quality and impact of management oversight and supervision.
- Performance management, quality assurance and audit processes.

- The impact of the corporate parenting panel on driving progress for all children and young people.

Main findings

Care leavers in West Berkshire are well supported by their PAs who know them well. PAs provide practical help and support when it is needed. Most young people have effective, open and honest relationships with their PAs, whom they see frequently. Young people are in regular touch with their PAs and communicate their needs, worries and aspirations. Some young people benefit from attending sessions where they can socialise, share experiences and receive support from other care leavers.

Young people live in homes that meet their needs and in which they feel safe. PAs ensure that young people are informed and advised about their accommodation options. This helps young people decide what type of accommodation would best suit their needs.

Young people are supported to develop independence skills that equip them for adulthood. Many young people live in supported accommodation and so can access as much support and assistance as needed.

Young people can access support and assistance from their PAs up until the age of 25, if this is what they need and want. PAs have open conversations with young people about the level of involvement and support they would like to receive as they become older. Some PAs are still in touch with young people who they previously supported, as they may be involved in helping to run the community groups or other activities on offer. The local authority operates a 'mentoring scheme', which is a support system through which care-experienced young people mentor other younger care-experienced young people. This is a positive scheme appreciated by the young people who have been involved in it.

PAs provide practical help and advice to young people about a wide variety of topics. There is also additional information provided in the 'independent living handbook'. Young people are supported to access and engage with appropriate physical, emotional and specialist healthcare services. If a young person needs emotional healthcare, PAs support young people to access specialist therapeutic support.

Young people are consistently encouraged and supported to be engaged in education, employment and training. Some young people have been successful academically and are attending university. Others have been supported and prepared to secure apprenticeships or other employment opportunities.

Those care leavers who are parents, in custody or are seeking asylum are very well supported. Each young person is provided with person-centred support that enables them to make progress and positively plan for their futures. PAs form strong

relationships with young people and provide them with the appropriate support, advice and guidance needed to assist them in their day-to-day lives.

Pathway plans are variable in quality. Stronger examples are well written with and to the young person. There are a small number of plans that have not been reviewed regularly or updated to reflect young people's current circumstances and situations. Young people are provided essential information about their rights, entitlements and finances. They also have access to their key documents and are informed of their rights to access their records.

The local offer is under review. It is basic and senior leaders would like the offer to be enhanced. The information provided in some of the booklets about the local offer is not up to date or easily accessible.

Management oversight and the supervision of PAs is variable in quality and impact. It does not occur regularly and lacks robust support and challenge of casework.

Strategic leaders recognise that the needs of children and young people in West Berkshire should be prioritised. However, leaders have not collectively ensured that they consistently focus on the outcomes of their children and young people and the impact of the corporate parenting panel. The focus of strategic and senior leaders is on their financial challenges, which has led to insufficient focus on children's experiences. There has been a lack of cohesion and support by political leaders to ensure that the transition to the new political administration has been smooth and remains child focused.

There have been changes in the leadership of the corporate parenting panel. These changes have delayed the actions and focus of the panel. Members of the panel have had recent training to fully understand their roles and accountabilities. Care-experienced young people and children in care have also provided corporate leaders and staff with 'total respect' training, which provides a powerful insight into the lives of the children, for whom the authority acts as a corporate parent. Senior leaders acknowledge that more work is needed to ensure that the planned developments are timely and impactful for children. They recognise that children in care and care-experienced young people have limited opportunities to influence and develop services in West Berkshire.

The quality assurance process, and specifically the quality and impact of audit activity, has declined since the previous inspection. Leaders have not fully utilised audit activity to provide clarity about the quality of practice and identification of what needs to improve. This has been further hindered by the local authority's electronic recording system. Additional 'workarounds' have been created to provide clarity and check data produced by the system. This is an interim measure while leaders await an updated system to be provided. Leaders know this and have created plans to address both quality assurance processes and recording systems. The impact of these plans is not yet evident.

There have been interim senior leadership arrangements within children's social care in West Berkshire for several months. These are being addressed through the imminent appointment and arrival of a permanent director for children's services. Current senior leaders are clear about the need for service improvement. However, the local authority self-evaluation is not explicit about the areas of weakness, nor are plans sufficiently smart to ensure that there will be timely action in addressing these weaknesses.

Senior leaders continue to work collaboratively with their partners to improve the offer of services for care-experienced young people in West Berkshire. They have focused on continual improvement to the local housing offer and supported accommodation offer. They have also focused on increasing the number of apprenticeships and employment opportunities for young people. More young people are benefiting from these developments.

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

Yours sincerely

Amanda Maxwell
His Majesty's Inspector