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Stephen Kitchman  
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Dear Mr Kitchman

### **Monitoring visit of Reading local authority children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Reading Borough Council children's services on 31 July and 1 August 2018. The visit was the seventh monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in June 2016. The visit was carried out by Nick Stacey and Maire Atherton, Her Majesty's Inspectors.

Based on the evidence gathered during this visit, young people leaving care receive better services than they did at the last inspection two years ago.

#### **Areas covered by the visit**

During the visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the area of young people leaving care, focusing on the quality and impact of the support provided by social workers and leaving care advisers (LCAs). Specific attention was paid to the transition work undertaken with young people aged 16 and 17 years as they prepare to leave care: the range and suitability of accommodation was explored, as was the advice and support provided to help young people into education, employment and training.

A range of evidence was considered during the visit, including electronic case records, supervision notes and other information about the service provided by managers. In addition, we spoke to several social workers, LCAs, managers and other staff. We also spoke with three young people who have left care, two of whom arrived in Reading as unaccompanied asylum seekers.

#### **Overview**

Senior leaders have continued to address the findings from the single inspection of June 2016. Detailed attention is paid to the individual needs and circumstances of young people preparing for their transition towards independent living. The local authority is improving services for young people preparing to leave care and care leavers. Young people aged 16 and 17 are carefully prepared during this transition

period through closely planned joint work between social workers and leaving care advisers. This produces suitable, clear arrangements for young people after they turn 18.

Young people aged 18 to 25 are supported well in all aspects of their lives by skilled and experienced LCAs. Sustained and continued efforts mean that no young people are left without dedicated support, even when they are resistant to being helped and are difficult to engage. Young people who live more unstable, chaotic lives as a result of the continuing adverse effects of their earlier childhood experiences, are well supported and rigorously challenged through the determined and dedicated work by LCAs.

A strong intent to build trusting, constructive and continuous professional relationships with young people who have left care permeates the work of social workers and LCAs. Social workers and LCAs are guided by helpful and supportive advice and direction from front line managers. The workloads of the LCAs remain too high, but measures to add additional LCA posts to the team to reduce caseloads are imminent.

### **Findings and evaluation of progress**

Based on the evidence gathered during the visit, senior and frontline managers, alongside social workers and LCAs, demonstrated that some effective measures have resulted in improved services for young people leaving care. However, some recommendations from the 2016 inspection have taken too long to address, such as the distribution of detailed written information on young people's entitlements and the overall offer provided by the service. This was in the latter stage of development at the time of the visit, but not yet available for young people. High LCA workloads, highlighted during an earlier monitoring visit, have not reduced. However, senior managers have recruited an additional three LCAs, who are scheduled to start their employment in the near future. This investment in additional posts is intended to reduce workloads to more manageable levels for a team of motivated and experienced LPAs. Workloads for four social workers, specialising in transition work with young people between 16 and 18 years of age, are reasonable.

Direct work with young people leaving care is a strength. LCAs and social workers make determined efforts to build and maintain purposeful relationships with young people. These strong professional attachments influence many young people to make progress with their education, employment and training (EET), and to benefit from living in suitable, supported, semi-independent housing settings. Accommodation providers promote and build young people's independent living skills, so that young people are able to manage living on their own at a time that is right for them.

Managers and LPAs know which young people are more vulnerable to greater risk, instability and chaos in their lives. Intense and frequent efforts are made to try and engage and divert young people who are involved in substance misuse or offending, or who are exposed to exploitation. Constructive partnership and multi-agency work

is widely prevalent with youth offending services, the police, the virtual school, accommodation support workers, substance misuse workers and other organisations. This illustrates a systemic, broad approach and commitment to reducing risks to young people. Young people under 18 who are frequently missing from their placements and exposed to exploitation are safeguarded through strategy meetings and other proactive measures. This can involve, for example, moving young people to other areas to reduce risky associations. Young people at greater risk are tracked through regular sexual exploitation and missing risk assessment conferences. Young people aged over 18 who are facing acute risks are reviewed through multi-agency meetings and are helped through a range of targeted services and interventions.

Some agencies withdraw their offers of help when young people refuse to engage: this can sometimes leave LCAs solely responsible for managing high levels of complex risk. The role of the adult safeguarding board (ASB) was uncertain in these circumstances. LCAs have made referrals to the board, but were advised, in two cases seen by inspectors, that the board had no role as the young people concerned already had allocated workers. The recently arrived permanent director of children's services (DCS) intends to pursue a strategic discussion with the ASB to clarify and seek to strengthen its involvement when young people are facing acute levels of risk in the community.

Senior managers have worked methodically to improve the range and suitability and availability of accommodation for young people. The local authority rigorously monitors the quality of independence training and the overall support and standard of the accommodation provided for young people through regular monitoring visits, including unannounced checks. Housing providers who fail to meet specified contract standards are challenged, and ultimately removed if necessary from the approved providers list. The housing department and children's social care work in partnership, offering 12 social housing flats for care leavers each year. The housing department also supports and advises young people on how to obtain suitable and decent standard accommodation in the private rented sector. Young people who lead more unstable and chaotic lives, which can often result in them leaving, or being evicted from their accommodation, are determinedly supported through a management 'solutions' panel as well as by their LCAs. Young people who need higher levels of support are provided with appropriate help, including extensive one-to-one packages, to try to contain and reduce the instability and risk they are experiencing. No young people are placed in bed and breakfast or unsuitable houses of multiple occupation.

Progress has been achieved in engaging more young people leaving care in meaningful education, employment and training opportunities (EET): 67% of young people, aged between 18 and 25, were in EET at the point of the visit. The virtual school is active and influential in its work with post-16-year-old young people through the development of targeted personal education plans (PEPs) and 're-engagement' PEPs. These initiatives are strengthened by the innovative work of two organisations that promote and provide pathways to employment and training opportunities. Regular meetings are held between involved partners, closely tracking

young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), and those who are at greater risk of discontinuing their programmes and courses. A small number of young people benefit from apprenticeships and work experience placements in the council.

Young people who arrive as unaccompanied asylum seekers are carefully supported. They are found accommodation suitable to their needs. However, not all foster carers understand and appreciate the cultural and religious customs of young people who have newly arrived in the UK. For one person, a misunderstanding led to the abrupt ending of his foster placement. Disabled young people who leave care are supported to communicate their views and wishes. Independent advocacy is provided for disabled young people and for other eligible young people aged 16 to 18. However, young people with significant disabilities who live in distant residential placements are not always visited regularly, and their well-being is not assessed with sufficient care and diligence. In two cases seen during the visit, there were long gaps in visits and little direct work was carried out with the young people.

Opportunities for young people to participate in and influence the provision and development of the services they receive are too limited. One young person spoken to by inspectors had been involved in recent interviews for senior management positions in the new children's company, which he welcomed. Regular events and opportunities for care leavers to meet with senior managers are insufficient. A very small group of young people meet with managers periodically, but this group is not large enough to capture and represent the views of other young people. A participation and engagement officer has been recruited to develop this. Some young people would welcome the opportunity to informally meet and receive support through a regular 'drop in' type arrangement.

Young people's health needs are supported by the provision of health passports by a local NHS trust. This ensures that care leavers' health histories are known by GPs and are transported to new GPs when young people's addresses change. Young people under the age of 18 benefit from timely and detailed annual health reviews. They have easy access to sexual health and substance misuse services and their health needs are comprehensively documented in their pathway plans. A multi-agency pathway for young people aged 16 to 17, and for care leavers aged 18 and over, to access support for emotional and mental health difficulties is underdeveloped. Services are offered to help young people, but this is dependent on the individual efforts of their LCAs rather than through a clearly defined health offer. Work is being led by the virtual school head and principal educational psychologist to address this.

Pathway planning for most young people is careful and thorough. The voice and participation of young people is a strong thread throughout the plans, and many are written in an engaging first-person style to emphasise the ownership of plans by young people. Identified needs are emphasised prominently, but the actions to progress these are not always specific, short term and measurable. Managers are keenly aware of this issue, and measures to involve young people in redesigning and improving the format and content of pathway plans are well advanced.

The quality of recorded management oversight is mixed, but all LCAs and social workers told inspectors that they feel well supported and guided in their direct work by managers who are easily available, knowledgeable and experienced. This is borne out in many thorough and evaluative case supervision records and written decisions seen during the visit: these provide clear and balanced actions for future direct work. There are some significant gaps in formal case supervision, and some recording features cursory updates and process-centred task instructions. The frequency of management oversight increases appropriately when young people's circumstances become less stable and risks increase. Internal audits seen by inspectors were thorough and evaluative, illustrating that the local authority has a more assured grip and understanding about the quality of practice.

A new permanent DCS took up his post shortly before this visit. He will go on to lead the newly formed independent children's company, scheduled to become fully operational in the late autumn of 2018. The positive trend in the recruitment of more permanent team managers and social workers has been maintained since the last monitoring visit. His priority is to complete recruitment to a small number of senior management posts that remain vacant.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely,

Nick Stacey  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**