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Dear Charlotte

Focused visit to Salford children's services

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic.

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Salford children's services on 20 and 21 July 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Kathryn Grindrod and Mandy Nightingale.

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. However, the delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. The lead inspector and the director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19. Inspectors were on site during the visit and carried out a combination of face-to-face and virtual meetings. Inspectors met with care leavers, pathway advisers, aftercare workers, managers and leaders.

Headline findings

An inspection of Salford children's services took place in October 2018, when the experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers were found to be good. Care leavers in Salford receive an impressive service from the local authority's Next Step service. Senior leaders and the wider council are committed to continuous improvement of the care leavers' service. A comprehensive local offer, effective strategic partnerships and a passionate and skilled workforce result in positive outcomes for care leavers.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The accessibility of written pathway plans for care leavers, including clarity of actions and contingency arrangements.
- The use of audits to drive improvements in practice.

Main findings

COVID-19 rates in Salford have been consistently above the national average and the tightest of lockdown restrictions have been in place throughout the pandemic. The local authority quickly recognised the impact that restrictions could have for their care leavers and responded well to reduce isolation and increase support. Regularly updated COVID-19 risk assessments inform decisions about when and where workers and care leavers will meet. A variety of communication methods are used to maintain frequent engagement with care leavers. Staff have been supported well throughout the pandemic, receiving practical and emotional support from leaders and managers, who have made themselves available virtually and in person.

Young people are well prepared for leaving care in Salford. Their rights and entitlements are carefully explained to them before they leave care, giving them time to consider their options and make informed choices. The Next Step service secures a wide variety of support tailored to the individual needs of care leavers, including those who will need ongoing involvement from adult services when they leave care.

Care leavers benefit from regular and detailed assessments which consider all their diverse needs. When care leavers are thought to be at risk, or pose a risk to others, this is well considered and acted on by the professionals involved. This leads to well-thought-out plans for care leavers that meet their needs. However, some actions detailed in the plans for care leavers are not specific enough, and contingency plans are not always sufficiently detailed, which can make it difficult to respond quickly to the changing needs of care leavers.

Written pathway plans are detailed and comprehensive, covering historical and current information thoroughly. Pathway plans are updated when circumstances change for young people and they are regularly independently reviewed. However, pathway plans are also often lengthy and sometimes repetitive, and as a result some care leavers told us they did not look at their written plans or get involved in their creation. While Next Step workers usually find ways to work around this disengagement, the length and complexity of written pathway plans hinders care leaver involvement in their plans.

Care leavers live in accommodation which meets their needs. They are offered suitable choices and their wishes and feelings are carefully considered. A very small number of care leavers in Salford have recently moved to houses of multiple occupancy. While the suitability of these living arrangements is considered and any potential risks mitigated, the rationale for the use of such accommodation is not clearly recorded on young people's records. This will make it difficult for care leavers

to understand why decisions were made, should they wish to access their written records.

Care leavers who are in custody are well supported and advised prior to their return to the community. Planning for these young people fully considers their wishes and feelings, and other agencies contribute well to these plans. This supports their rehabilitation.

Care leavers are well supported by Next Step workers to achieve their ambitions in relation to education, employment or training. Next Step workers show persistence, ambition and creativity to help care leavers explore their options and achieve their goals. The wide range of available options and support offered means a high number of care leavers are in employment, education or training when compared with national figures. Those who are not are encouraged by Next Step workers to maintain a focus on their future ambitions, which helps them to progress when the time is right for them.

A wide variety of available services ensure that care leavers have their health needs met when they choose to accept the support offered to them. Prompt referrals are made to specialist services when it is appropriate for young people, such as support for substance misuse, emotional well-being and prevention of youth offending. When care leavers find it difficult to work directly with specialist services, Next Step workers take expert advice from professionals in those services and complete work with young people themselves. This ensures care leavers receive the advice and support they need, at the time they need it.

Next Step workers know their young people well. The stability of the service means care leavers experience enduring relationships with their workers, and care leavers told us about the positive impact of this. Care leavers value the fact that the support they are offered is individualised to their specific needs. They told us that their workers are always there when they need them. One care leaver told us their worker was 'profoundly patient' and another told us they 'would not be here' without their worker.

Care leavers benefit from the persistence shown by Next Step workers to keep in touch with young people. Workers use different methods to maintain this contact, taking account of current risks for young people and their preferred communication methods. They visit them regularly, depending on their needs and wishes. This has reduced feelings of isolation for care leavers and provides them with multiple opportunities to seek support and advice when they need it.

Feedback about the Next Step service is regularly sought from care leavers who sit on formal groups, such as the Next Step reference group and Fight for Change Council. This informs the learning and development plan for the workforce and better aligns service provision to what care leavers want and need. Questionnaires are regularly sent to care leavers to seek their views about the wider service, although the majority of care leavers choose not to respond. This means that those care

leavers who choose not to attend formal groups or to respond to routine questionnaires do not have their views about wider service provision captured. The local authority has recognised this and is considering how they might capture broader views about the service.

As a corporate parent, the local authority shows ambition and determination to secure the best outcomes for care leavers and continues to strengthen the multi-agency service offer to care leavers. Strong strategic partnership arrangements lead to effective multi-agency working, and care leavers have priority in accessing a variety of services to meet their individual needs.

The local authority has a well-established system for regular auditing of casework. However, audits do not consistently identify the actions to be taken to improve outcomes for young people when this is needed. This is a missed opportunity to improve practice for individual care leavers and the wider service.

Senior leaders have maintained regular and informative contact with staff throughout the pandemic. They support the workforce well by showing flexibility in working arrangements and the provision of resources, such as counselling. Next Step workers feel supported and safe. They receive regular and useful supervision which helps them to secure better outcomes for care leavers. However, actions agreed at supervision are not always given timescales for completion and are not routinely revisited at the next supervision. This is also the case in some pathway review meetings. This makes it harder for managers to hold workers to account for completing agreed actions.

Caseloads are within the local authority's expected range and the majority of Next Step workers describe their workload as manageable. Managers show flexibility in ensuring the right person is allocated to work with care leavers at the right time. There are, however, some delays in completing documents and uploading information to the electronic recording system, making it difficult for other workers to know the current situation for care leavers should they need to.

Next Step workers described helpful training and development opportunities, including during the pandemic. Career progression routes are available for the Next Step workforce and this contributes to stability in the service. Next Step workers told us that they thoroughly enjoy their work, as they can see the positive impact they have on young people's lives.

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

Yours sincerely

Kathryn Grindrod
Her Majesty's Inspector