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3 September 2021

Niki Clemo  
Interim Director of Children's Services  
Civic Centre  
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Dear Ms Clemo

### **Monitoring visit of Stoke-on-Trent children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Stoke-on-Trent children's services on 29 and 30 July 2021. The visit was the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in March 2019. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Kathryn Grindrod and Andrew Waugh.

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

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress of care leavers, whether services and the quality of practice have improved and, if so, whether changes to practice are embedded and being sustained.

The lead inspector and the director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively by fully remote means. Inspectors used video calls and telephone calls for discussions with care leavers, local authority staff and senior leaders. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and care leavers' electronic care records.

### **Overview**

Following the last inspection in 2019, the local authority identified specific actions to improve services for care leavers. Progress has been made against most of those actions. For example, care leavers are helped to access services to improve their emotional well-being and mental health, disabled care leavers do not experience gaps in provision between children and adult service provision, and the overall quality of pathway plans has improved.

There remain areas that need further improvement. For example, planning for some care leavers, including those in custody, is not dynamic enough and does not keep

pace with their changing needs, and the impact that care leavers have on strategic planning cannot be evidenced. There is also more to do to ensure supervision and quality assurance activity routinely identify all deficits in practice and focus further on outcomes rather than processes.

The local authority has a broad understanding of the strengths and areas for development in the services it provides for care leavers. The commitment to continue improving outcomes for care leavers is stated at the highest levels of the local authority. This includes building opportunities for care leavers into contracts the council agrees with local businesses. The impact of this ambition on outcomes for individual care leavers is just starting to be seen and is therefore limited.

## **Findings and evaluation of progress**

Care leavers are involved in creating their pathway plans when they choose to be. Their wishes and feelings are consistently recorded and taken into consideration. Care leavers with disabilities and complex health needs receive appropriate support to meet their needs. They are helped to successfully transition from receiving support from children's services to adult services. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are supported appropriately with issues relating to their immigration status as they prepare to leave care. However, not all pathway assessments consider the impact of wider identity on young people and they are not updated when a young person's circumstances change. This leads to plans that do not fully meet all of the care leavers' needs.

Support and planning for care leavers due to leave custody is not always effective and timely. This means that some care leavers leave custody without firm plans about their longer-term accommodation, which increases the risk of them reoffending or breaching licence conditions.

Most care leavers live in suitable accommodation. Young people's wishes and feelings are carefully considered when securing accommodation and care leavers told us they had a choice about where they lived. Where appropriate, young people are encouraged to remain in 'staying put' arrangements, and those who live independently are supported by regular visits from their personal advisers or social workers. Those care leavers who have additional needs benefit from involvement with the 'House project', which offers properties and intensive ongoing support to help them successfully maintain their tenancies.

Most of the care leavers who live in unsuitable accommodation are in custody. A small minority of care leavers live in other unsuitable accommodation, such as with friends. Some of those care leavers live in unsuitable accommodation because, despite the support offered, they are unable to manage their accommodation needs. This was reinforced by the view of a small number of care leavers who told us that while a variety of support was offered to them, it was not always individualised according to their existing knowledge and skills about issues such as budgeting.

Care leavers feel well supported to achieve their ambitions in relation to education, employment and training. Care leavers who are currently not in education, employment or training receive additional support from careers advisers. While rates have improved since the last inspection, the overall number of care leavers in education, employment or training remains low compared to national figures and has very recently declined. The local authority recognises there is more to do to raise young people's ambitions and increase the number of care leavers who are in education, employment and training, and that this must start well before children leave care.

Care leavers who are parents experience positive support from their personal advisers or social workers and other professionals working well together. When young parents have experienced the loss of children through bereavement or care proceedings, additional services are sought to ensure they have access to specialist professionals who can support them through challenging times.

Care leavers are supported to take action to meet their health needs. Personal advisers and social workers discuss healthy lifestyles and risks associated with smoking, drugs and alcohol with young people, and involve specialist health services when appropriate. Some care leavers told us that they had not been provided with information about their health history, although they knew how to request it if they wished to.

The majority of care leavers are appropriately supported to manage risks they may face, such as the risk of exploitation or gang association. Personal advisers and social workers are encouraged by managers to be curious and persistent in identifying any such concerns. For most care leavers, this means they are then helped to stay safe. Specialist services, such as peer mentoring, are available and become involved when young people are agreeable to such support.

Most children in care get to know their personal advisers before turning 18, which allows them to start building relationships with them. Care leavers have regular contact with their personal advisers, which is varied depending on the needs of the young person. Some care leavers who have struggled to work with professionals now have trusting relationships with their personal adviser. This means they feel able to ask for help and advice when they need to.

Some care leavers told us they need more practical support than they receive. Personal advisers try to balance care leavers being adults and making their own decisions with ensuring their needs are met. However, the decision-making about where that judgement lands and why is not always clearly reasoned, meaning sometimes personal advisers do not step in to advocate for care leavers when needed.

Individual care leavers know how to raise their concerns. However, the impact care leavers have on wider service delivery is not clear. Formal groups, where some care leavers meet, have stalled due to the COVID-19 pandemic and staffing issues. The local authority has recognised the need to improve engagement and participation

and is considering available options, including surveys of care leavers and reviewing the aims and activities of formal groups.

The local authority has a suite of performance reports that track compliance with key requirements, such as the updating of pathway plans in prescribed timescales. A detailed quality assurance framework sets clear expectations from auditing activity. Identified actions from audits are still mainly compliance focused and do not consistently identify how outcomes for young people could be further improved. The process of audit moderation has very recently focused more on outcomes for young people, however, the impact of this for individual care leavers could not be seen during this visit.

Personal advisers and social workers feel well supported by their managers and speak positively about working for Stoke-on-Trent local authority. Personal advisers say that their caseloads are usually manageable. They are positive about the training on offer to them and can describe the impact it has on their practice.

Supervision of personal advisers and social workers takes place regularly and is reflective and detailed. More recently, supervision actions are assigned timescales and are followed up in subsequent supervision sessions. While managers focus their discussions on the young person, they do not always identify what needs to happen to improve their outcomes and positive life experiences. For example, when pathway plans need to be updated due to significant changes in a young person's circumstances, this is not always recognised. This can lead to stalling of progress in the plan and a young person's needs not being fully met.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Kathryn Grindrod  
Her Majesty's Inspector