

12 October 2021

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Dear Rachael

Monitoring visit to Surrey County Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Surrey County Council children's services on 7 and 8 September 2021. This was the fifth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in May 2018. Her Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Nick Stacey and Christine Kennett.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- The provision of information for young people on their entitlements and health histories.
- The workloads of personal advisers (PAs) in the leaving care teams.
- The experiences and progress of young people aged 18 to 25 years of age who have left care.

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

Headline findings

Most young people are supported well by their PAs, and this work helps them to make progress in their transitions to becoming independent young adults. Young people who are unaccompanied asylum seekers (UAS) receive specialist and skilled support. The workloads of PAs are manageable. Some young people have not received sufficient support and advice from a duty system that covers vacant posts. This is due to workforce instability in some care leavers' teams as a result of high levels of PA sickness and turnover. Young people have information on their health

histories and are provided with a range of information on their entitlements and the local offer for care leavers.

Findings and evaluation of progress

PAs understand the profiles and needs of young people well and are in touch with nearly all care leavers. They work hard to maintain contact and trusting relationships. This enables strong progress in many important areas of their young adult lives. A small number of young people have not been well supported because of frequent changes in their allocated PA. A few young people have been supported through a duty system for lengthy periods due to their PA being absent on sick leave, or because of gaps in allocated workers while vacant posts are waiting to be filled.

PAs complete skilled and sensitive work with young people. This help is highly valued by the young people that inspectors spoke to during the visit. Examples of this important work include helping young women safely exit from abusive and controlling intimate relationships; negotiating with universities when young people are having difficulties that interrupt their studies, preventing them from dropping out of their courses; sensitive work with sexual orientation issues and during periods of mental and emotional distress.

The quality of PAs' written records of their direct work with young people varies widely. Many are very brief descriptions of activity and events. Some records illustrate warmth and curiosity about their lives and progress through comprehensive, succinct evaluative summaries that address priority needs. Young people's opinions, frustrations and achievements are clearly conveyed.

Young people's awareness of the local authority's offer for care leavers and their entitlements is mixed. When they are involved with an active and influential user voice and participation group, their knowledge was highly informed. A small number of young people are frustrated that some PAs, particularly when they were inexperienced, did not understand their entitlements and they sometimes had to explain them. Young people are, however, provided with extensive information, both in paper and digital formats. These have accessible links and signposts to more detailed information and further sources of advice.

PAs ensure that young people receive their critical documents promptly. A small number did not receive their passports and National Insurance numbers quickly enough, and these delays had serious adverse impacts. A few young people complained that their weekly support payments and travel warrants were repeatedly delayed, causing acute difficulties.

Many young people's pathway plans are engaging documents demonstrating their active involvement. These plans comprehensively address all of their short- and longer-term needs. They also document parallel and triple contingency planning to consider different pathways and circumstances that could emerge. Other plans are

predominantly bureaucratic, 'tick box' documents that some young people said were boring and irrelevant. Young people are provided with paper and electronic copies of their plans and benefit from a range of well-targeted support services. However, the impact of effective multi-agency work is rarely captured in their pathway plans and reviews. Reviews are mainly held every six months, but usually involve just the young person and their PA.

Young people are provided with their health histories and are registered with local GPs. Their physical, emotional and mental health needs are largely understood well, and promoted. Young people living outside the local authority, particularly UAS, wait much longer to receive support if they struggle with poor mental health.

The majority of young people are in suitable education, employment and training, commensurate with their abilities and ambitions. However, nearly a third of young people are not, and this rate of non-engagement has not improved since the last inspection. The virtual school provides helpful dedicated education and employment advice for care leavers and UAS young people. An extensive range of mentoring, and other well-targeted initiatives, helps many young people to make progress. Senior managers recognise that they need to do more work within the county council and with local employers to provide more opportunities for young people to enter employment, apprenticeships and training in the local economy.

Young people who arrived in the UK as UAS are very well supported by PAs who work in two specialist teams. Most young people initially live in suitable short-term hostel-type settings while their needs are assessed. Most move on to live in suitable semi-independent accommodation within reasonable time frames. Young people's urgent practical needs are met quickly. This crucially includes quickly offering legal support for their applications to the Home Office. PAs quickly put them in touch with the Red Cross to help them try and find information about their families.

Young people's cultural and religious affiliations, and their preferences and habits, are strongly promoted by their PAs. Care is taken to facilitate their access to places of worship and to help them eventually move to live closer to, or in areas where they have friends, extended family and larger populations from their countries of origin. Increased risks of exploitation are considered if young people move to live in areas where they may be more vulnerable if important support networks are not in place, underpinned by cautious safety planning. Senior leaders are keen to provide more targeted help and support that may encourage more young people to remain in areas of Surrey with larger multicultural communities.

The cumulative trauma and abuse many young people experience in their countries of origin and during their arduous, dangerous journeys to the UK are understood and skilfully addressed. This work is supported by a specialist mental health worker and a wide range of local, commissioned and voluntary resources that help young people's assimilation into the UK. Young people benefit from swift enrolment on English for speakers of other languages courses. This enables many to subsequently progress to

other courses and training pathways. Many young people are well supported by a dedicated UAS worker in the virtual school, and their PAs.

Young people live in suitable accommodation. A limited proportion of young people stay put with their former foster carers when they reach 18 years of age, but this rate is comparable with other local authorities. Many UAS young people, and care leavers more broadly, express a strong preference to live in non-family settings. A wide spectrum of support is provided in semi-independent settings, tailored to each young person's needs. Support is increased, when needed, or alternatively is reduced as young people develop more skills and confidence in managing independent living. Most young people feel safe in their accommodation and like it. They appreciate the support and guidance provided by their accommodation key workers. Commissioning, contract monitoring and quality assurance of semi-independent accommodation has strengthened further since the last inspection.

Semi-independent providers are effective in giving most young people the skills and confidence they need as they progress towards living independently. An accredited independence skills programme has recently been introduced to further strengthen young people's preparation. Young people are rarely placed in independent accommodation before they have the practical skills and emotional maturity to manage capably. Floating outreach support is provided for some young people to reduce abrupt transitions.

Young people's access to council and social housing varies. Senior managers have continued negotiations with the county's 11 district councils to try and achieve a more consistent pathway. Good progress has been achieved, and all the district councils provide exemption from Council Tax for care leavers. Bidding processes and prioritisation of care leavers' applications are different, meaning that some young people are offered flats sooner than others. PAs actively advocate for young people to secure permanent housing, both inside the local authority, and for a significant number of young people who choose to live elsewhere. Young people who live outside the county do not have priority access to dedicated mental health support, and their access to other support services is more difficult to arrange. Despite this disparity, most PAs try hard to find the support that young people need.

PAs have manageable workloads that provide sufficient time for them to undertake direct work with young people. They are largely well supported by their team managers, some of whom are very skilled and knowledgeable. Most young people allocated to PAs are reviewed in supervision meetings every three months. Many supervision records demonstrate useful reflective, problem-solving discussions. Well-targeted actions are set and reviewed, but it is not always evident why some are subsequently delayed or incomplete. PAs value reflective group practice sessions as helpful forums, supported by the attendance of a specialist mental health worker.

Senior managers fully accept that some care leaver teams have been adversely affected by significant absence and turnover of PAs, resulting in poorer support for a

small number of young people. They are working hard to stabilise these teams and some progress is evident. Leaders and managers have a strong understanding of the quality of practice provided to young people through rigorous quality assurance work.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Nick Stacey
Her Majesty's Inspector