

22 November 2021

Helen Lincoln  
Executive Director for Children, Families & Education (DCS)  
County Hall  
Market Road  
Chelmsford  
CM1 1QH

Dear Helen

### **Focused visit to Essex County Council children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Essex County Council children's services on 18 and 19 October 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Margaret Burke and Tracey Scott.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for care leavers aged 18 to 25.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. It took place on site in Essex. Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including electronic records, supervision notes, case management records, management reports, performance data and audits. They spoke to a range of staff including personal advisers (PAs), social workers, other specialist workers and managers. They also spoke directly with care leavers.

### **Headline findings**

Leaders have created a positive environment for practitioners and their managers to find solutions to challenges faced by the care leavers they work with. This has resulted in a wealth of innovative initiatives and translated well into effective responses to individual care leavers, supporting them to successfully transition on to independence. This creative culture has continued throughout the period of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and beyond, with staff flexibly adapting their ways of working. Staff have continued to be available and to reach out to care leavers, providing effective support in response to their needs.

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

- Level up opportunities across the county and increase the numbers of care leavers engaged in education, training and employment.

## **Main findings**

Care leavers are a priority for the council. Care leavers know who their corporate parents are; they describe them as approachable and willing to listen, and act on the things that they raise. Essex corporate parents include a range of agencies, local training and business organisations, and employers who have signed up to the Care Leavers Charter and demonstrate their commitment through the support they offer to care leavers. Care leavers are aware of this support and the range of training, job and other opportunities they have priority access to.

PAs are caring, persistent and work hard to build strong and trusting relationships with care leavers. They are resourceful, and they petition and advocate for care leavers, frequently going the extra mile. This is highly valued by care leavers. Good workforce stability means that care leavers have lasting relationships with experienced PAs. Many have the same PAs throughout their care leaving journey.

Care-experienced young people over the age of 21 are aware of the opportunities to request further support when they need it. A high level of support is offered to care leavers who are parents, both to address their own individual needs and to draw in services to help them provide good care for their children. PAs maintain contact with care leavers who are in custody, making persistent efforts to keep in touch, conducting welfare checks, visits and, at times, liaising with others on their behalf.

Multi-disciplinary teamwork is a strength. Mental health coordinators and targeted youth advisers work alongside PAs within a culture and environment of shared learning, expertise and support. This multi-disciplinary approach, enhanced by employability workers, a benefits adviser and the work of the pilot occupational therapist project, means that care leavers benefit from additional specialist input and can get fast-track access to other services.

Care leavers' health needs are recognised, and they are encouraged by their PAs to sign up and make full use of the available health services. However, it is not always evident that young people are fully aware of their health history and have received their health passport. Some care leavers benefit from free access to leisure facilities; however, this is not accessible to all, as it is dependent on where they live.

The provision of mental health coordinators within the team gives care leavers easy access to good support for their emotional well-being needs. This early intervention mental health resource has been particularly pertinent during the pandemic, helping many young people through these difficult times. However, those care leavers who need additional specialist input from adult mental health or psychology services have spent long periods of time on waiting lists for these services.

Although in its early stages, the new occupational therapist role in the leaving and after-care service is already having an impact in supporting young people's skills for more independent living, and in identifying and advocating for services on their behalf.

Most care leavers' pathway plans are co-produced with them. The plans are clear about their current needs and aspirations and how they will be met. Young people's consent to share information is appropriately sought and respected. Their strengths are recognised and achievements celebrated. Young people spoke positively about being involved in their pathway plans. Workers generally review pathway plans with young people every six months, although they are not consistently doing so when significant changes occur in young people's lives. Greater attention needs to be given to contingency planning, particularly contingency planning for placements, to increase the value and relevance of pathway plans in crisis situations.

Care leavers are fully involved in a wealth of initiatives for children in care and care leavers. They were particularly proud of their roles as Big Volunteers in the It's My Life events for children in care and care leavers. However, they have limited involvement in or awareness of the authority's local offer for care leavers and what it means for them. The Essex Local Offer for care leavers is published on its website and provides young people, who are eligible, with an outline of their entitlements and the additional resources over which managers can exercise discretion. This formal offer is complemented by PAs, the benefits adviser and specialist workers who are very resourceful in seeking out benefits and additional funding sources, to ensure young people get the support that they need.

Most care leavers live in suitable accommodation with good support which meets their needs. Young people are encouraged to remain with their foster carers in staying put arrangements. They maintain strong links with their carers, even after their placements have formally ended. Care leavers do well in these arrangements. They have good access to additional support from specialist practitioners, including advice to ensure that they and their carers receive the full range of benefits.

However, some young people told inspectors they had to move too often, sometimes in an unplanned way, and even when the accommodation they had was of good quality. Some young people said that they did not always feel safe in their homes or the areas in which they lived. Leaders have begun to implement changes in their accommodation provision and to reduce the number of moves young people are required to make as they progress on to independence. They have consulted with young people and are now actively in the process of recommissioning their housing provision.

Practitioners recognise when care leavers are at risk. They make appropriate referrals to the National Referral Mechanism and other specialist services, to support care leavers at risk of exploitation. PAs work hard to address concerns and respond to these vulnerable care leavers, but the use of tools to support risk assessments for care leavers over the age of 18 is limited, resulting in ad hoc or uncoordinated support. While the safeguarding arrangements in place for children support the work with some of these young adults, and relevant training has been offered to PAs, leaders recognise that they must build on the work started and embed a multi-agency and coordinated response to this vulnerable group of adult care leavers.

Protocols and transition arrangements between children's and adult services for care leavers with disabilities are clear and ensure that young people remain supported through this transition process. Most care leavers with disabilities benefit from carefully considered planning and decision-making, to ensure that they have appropriate accommodation and support that is tailored to their needs. Families are kept engaged in decision-making. Where a care leaver's liberty is restricted, comprehensive, best-interest decisions are undertaken with a clear supporting rationale.

PAs, targeted youth advisers and employability workers exercise vision and innovation, actively encouraging young people into employment or to remain in education or training. Essex has partnered with leading employers and other organisations to provide a range of exciting opportunities and new initiatives for training and employment. Support is offered to both the employer and the care leaver. The offer also extends to care leavers having access to a dressing and coaching service to help boost their confidence at job interviews. Discussions with education establishments have expanded the offer of English for Speakers of Other Languages courses in the county. Efforts are made to support all young people to access available public funds to support them while in education, and, in accordance with regulations, education bursaries are available to care leavers at university. Many care leavers are doing well in their education and training. All care leavers have been provided with laptops or iPads and Wi-Fi connection to support college work and help reduce isolation.

There are notable variations across the county, with one area reporting much higher numbers of care leavers in education, training and employment than others. While workers have speculated on possible reasons for the differences, more is required to understand and level up these variations, ensuring that all care leavers have access to, and are well supported to take up, suitable education, training and employment opportunities.

Care leavers who are former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) are supported effectively by PAs who are sensitive to their needs and life experiences. PAs are thorough. PAs make time for learning, to understand and recognise the cultural and heritage needs of these young people, and to ensure that the support they offer meets their needs well. PAs are resourceful when trying to meet the mental health and trauma needs of this group of young people, but they too are impacted by long waiting times for adult mental health services. PAs recognise the isolation some of these young people have faced, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. They have arranged activities and set up group sessions to address this. The tenacity and persistence shown by PAs have resulted in former UASC care leavers being able to successfully reconnect with estranged family members and to engage with others within their communities.

Leaders and managers generally use audits and quality assurance processes well to recognise overarching issues and themes, and to focus on any aspects of practice which require further strengthening. Additional pressures on services during the

pandemic have resulted in periodic pauses in the audit programme. This has meant that, in recent months, more limited opportunities have been available for leaders to scrutinise the quality and impact of practice within leaving and after-care services. Leaders have recognised that more attention is required to ensure the timely follow through of actions identified within individual audits. They have identified the need to increase the numbers of completed audits focused on care leavers aged 18 plus to meet their own set targets.

Knowledgeable, passionate and committed practitioners within leaving and after-care services demonstrate a real commitment to the young people they work with. They are very positive about their managers' support and the reflective supervision and guidance they receive. Extensive professional development opportunities are available to staff, and staff are encouraged to take them up with no barriers. Learning and career development are positively supported. It is evident that training has shaped and influenced workers' practice, as they seek to understand the issues that care leavers face and find better ways to support them. This culture of learning has had a positive impact on service delivery and outcomes for young people.

While workloads fluctuate, most practitioners see them as manageable, with time and capacity to do a good job. Some young people are not getting the benefit of a PA allocated to them prior to their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Where this is the case, however, they continue to be supported by their children in care team social worker until transfer to the leaving and after-care service is actioned.

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

Yours sincerely

Margaret Burke  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**