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24 November 2021

Alison Noble  
Interim Executive Director of Children's Services  
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Dear Alison

### **Focused visit to Derbyshire local authority children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Derbyshire local authority children's services on 20 and 21 October 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Andy Whippey and Andy Waugh.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for supporting care leavers.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. The visit was conducted entirely on site. Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including care leavers' records, and they held case discussions with leaving care workers and social workers. Inspectors spoke to a number of care leavers and partner agencies. Inspectors also reviewed local authority performance and quality assurance information.

### **Headline findings**

The determined focus on the provision of services for care leavers by senior managers and elected members since the inspection in 2019, including bringing the service in-house, has resulted in significant improvements. These improvements are visible, tangible and sustained. Improvements to the quality of individual support for care leavers, together with a number of corporate initiatives, have contributed to most care leavers in Derbyshire receiving levels of support consistent with their needs. A comprehensive local offer, effective strategic partnerships, and a passionate and skilled workforce are enabling positive experiences and progress for care leavers. This has been achieved despite the considerable challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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

- The consistent review of pathway plans when needs or circumstances change.
- Arrangements to evidence that actions agreed by the safety panel have been robustly tracked and completed.

## **Main findings**

Pathway plans are written well, identifying concerns and targeting actions appropriately. The aspirations, wishes and concerns of care leavers are apparent. The plans are ambitious, reflecting a determination for care leavers to succeed in their objectives. However, the agreed actions are scattered throughout the plan and not brought together in one place. This lessens the overall impact of the plan. Pathway plans are not consistently reviewed when care leavers' needs increase or risks escalate, meaning that some plans do not reflect care leavers' current circumstances.

The leaving care service becomes actively involved with children in care when they reach 16 years of age. This work not only focuses on relationship-building and information-sharing to ensure an effective transition to the leaving care service at 18, but also on developing life skills. Inspectors saw many positive and creative examples of direct work being undertaken by leaving care workers. This is helping care leavers to develop the necessary skills to negotiate the opportunities and challenges of adulthood. Care leavers' entitlements and the local authority 'offer' to care leavers are explained clearly, helping young people to understand what they are being offered and the choices that are available to them.

Effective partnership working at a strategic level is beginning to have a positive impact on health provision for care leavers. Health partners have embraced the role of being a corporate parent and are developing initiatives that will support care leavers, including free prescriptions and investing in specialist services. Health needs are considered in pathway plans and there is effective liaison with partners to identify specialist provision when required. Care leavers, wherever they live, receive support from the specialist nursing team, ensuring that they have access to their local services. An increasing number of care leavers now have access to their health histories.

Pathway plans include a clear focus on education, employment and training (EET), with actions designed to help care leavers choose the appropriate route. Specialist workers show a determination to find opportunities for care leavers of all abilities, with a culture of not giving up on a young person embedded across the service. EET workers have engaged partners well, enabling care leavers to access opportunities across the whole county. Their impact on improving outcomes for care leavers is very evident, with a significant increase in successful apprenticeships and in young people going to university.

Risks to individual care leavers are identified well; when risks escalate, including risks of exploitation, a referral is made to the multi-agency care leaver safety panel. Panel meetings demonstrate good consideration of risks, needs and actions to reduce risk. However, the process for the follow-through of actions and the reassessment of risk is not clear for those cases which do not come back to the subsequent panel. The overall multi-agency profile of exploitation across the county, including exploitation 'hotspots', is still to be fully explored by the partnership.

The local authority, in consultation with care leavers, has commissioned a wide range of accommodation that supports care leavers at different points of their progress into independence. Young people's needs are carefully considered at a matching panel. This process enables them to feel secure in their accommodation, knowing that they have the right levels of support. Care leavers' wishes regarding the location of their accommodation are respected, helping them to maintain relationships with people who are important to them. Care leavers continue to benefit from council tax exemption within the county, and for those that move out of the county, their council tax is paid for by Derbyshire.

District councils and partners are fully engaged in ensuring that young people have the right accommodation at the right time, and the vast majority of care leavers are in accommodation that meets their needs. On very rare occasions, after all other options have been exhausted or rejected by care leavers, they have been placed briefly in bed and breakfast accommodation, while a suitable alternative is secured. Support is increased until the young person is in a safer environment. If young people are at risk of losing their housing tenancy, there is effective liaison between housing and the care leavers' service before a decision is made, allowing young people the opportunity to resolve the concerns. Senior managers are aware of the need to continue to work with district and borough councils to ensure as wide a range of accommodation as possible for care leavers with urgent or exceptional needs and so avoid the use of bed and breakfast accommodation.

Work with care leavers between 21 and 25 years of age is sensitive and proportionate to their views and current circumstances. Care leavers are clearly informed of their rights and entitlements to services post-21, helping them to make informed decisions. When care leavers have not wanted to receive a service at the time but have requested subsequent involvement when their circumstances have changed, such requests have been responded to positively, with appropriate interventions.

Care leavers who are in custody are supported well and assisted with their return to the community. Planning for these young people fully considers their wishes and feelings, and there is good engagement by other agencies. This supports their rehabilitation.

Care leavers, including those who have children of their own, are visited at a frequency consistent with their level of need and risk, with patterns of contact

increasing or decreasing as necessary. Although visiting patterns and contact with young people are appropriate and clearly understood by workers, they are not always detailed in supervision records; a small number of records lack clarity regarding the expected visiting pattern and actions designed to improve care leavers' well-being. Leaving care workers are creative in terms of maintaining contact and, overall, care leavers are supported well by their workers. Records of the vast majority of visits to care leavers are well written, in a conversational style, and have actions to be completed as a result of the visit. Visits are focused and have a clear purpose.

Care leavers told inspectors that they valued the service. They described the workers in the team as caring and supportive, sticking with them, without being overwhelming. Visits from workers were at a frequency that they needed. On most occasions, care leavers could contact workers when necessary.

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 available to them. Strong strategic partnership arrangements have led to effective multi-agency working, and care leavers have priority in accessing a variety of services to meet their individual needs. Care leavers are actively involved in determining the focus of the corporate parenting board. The views of care leavers are fully reflected in the minutes of the board, with partners being held to account for their actions.

Staff have access to a wide range of induction and training opportunities. They report that they are very well supported by proactive, visible managers and they are encouraged to engage in training and development events. These events provide good opportunities to reflect and focus on practice improvement with care leavers. Caseloads are manageable and enable workers to undertake effective direct work with young people.

Senior managers have a good understanding of the strengths of the service and are aware of the areas for further development. Case audits, undertaken through thorough and reflective case reviews, are well embedded and include meaningful discussion with workers in relation to their practice. The outcomes of such reviews are used well to improve the service to care leavers. Managers have a range of performance information on a leaving care dashboard which they use to manage the service effectively.

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

Yours sincerely

Andy Whippey  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**