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Dear Cathi

Monitoring visit to West Northamptonshire local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to West Northamptonshire local authority children's services on 2 and 3 November 2021. West Northamptonshire became a unitary authority on 1 April 2021. This was the second monitoring visit to West Northamptonshire, and the fifth visit overall since children's services in the predecessor local authority, Northamptonshire County Council, were judged inadequate in 2019. The visit was carried out by three of Her Majesty's Inspectors: Rachel Griffiths, Julie Knight and Rebecca Quedsted.

Despite the ongoing challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, senior leaders have continued to focus on improvement. This has resulted in steady progress in improving services for care leavers and 16- and 17-year-old children in care.

Areas covered by the visit

During this on-site visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made to improve the experiences of care leavers, with a specific focus on:

- The sufficiency and quality of accommodation for care leavers, and children in care aged 16 and 17.
- Transition planning for disabled children.
- The quality of pathway plans and the quality of management oversight and supervision in order to progress plans.
- The quality and impact of support and interventions for care leavers.
- The effectiveness of senior leadership, including the use of quality assurance.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, performance management information, case file audits and other information provided by senior leaders. In addition, inspectors spoke with some care leavers and a range of staff.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Senior leaders have made progress in improving services for care leavers since the 2019 inspection of local authority children's services in Northamptonshire. However, the quality and consistency of practice are still too variable; senior leaders have realistic and achievable plans for improvement.

Personal advisers keep in regular contact with care leavers and increase the frequency according to need. Most personal advisers know their care leavers well and speak about them with pride and passion.

However, the quality of support provided to care leavers by personal advisers varies. Some care leavers experience lasting and positive relationships with their personal advisers, meaning that they have a trusted adult with whom they can share their aspirations and worries. Some care leavers reported having almost daily contact with their personal adviser during the pandemic, which they really appreciated. Conversely, other young people shared more negative experiences because of changes of worker, staff sickness and a duty system that they found difficult to navigate. These care leavers did not feel adequately supported, particularly during the pandemic.

The quality and timeliness of written pathway plans have improved since the 2019 inspection. They are regularly updated and written collaboratively with care leavers, reflecting their aspirations as well as their personal adviser's support for them to achieve their goals. Some pathway plans reflect care leavers' individual characteristics and cultural needs well. However, others do not sufficiently explore care leavers' histories, past experiences, or separation or estrangement from important people in their lives, and how this may affect their day-to-day experience. This means that for some care leavers, the plan does not address some important aspects of their lives.

When disabled children in care reach the age of 16, they benefit from pathway plans that identify their strengths and needs for the future. Children's views are appropriately incorporated throughout the plan to inform next steps, although children are not provided with a child-friendly copy of their plan. Better plans incorporate the views of other professionals and independent reviewing officers, enabling clearer decision-making for next steps. Some disabled children experience delay in their transition to adult services. This has led to worry and anxiety for these children and their carers about where they will live and who will look after them once they reach adulthood.

Safety planning is inconsistent for older children in care and care leavers who are particularly vulnerable, such as those who are young parents or who are at risk of

exploitation. In better examples, risks are identified promptly, and multi-agency meetings result in actions being taken to safeguard them. For other older children in care and care leavers, inspectors saw a lack of understanding of risks, delays in planning and safety plans failing to provide clear guidance about how risks should be reduced. Management oversight of care leavers who have become homeless has improved since the 2019 inspection, resulting in many of their housing situations being resolved, although some inconsistency remains.

Most children in care aged 16 and 17 who are living in supported accommodation are receiving the right level of support to help them to progress into adulthood. Managers ensure that these placements are appropriate for them. Senior managers have sought legal advice on the rare occasions when placements may be operating as unregistered children's homes and have taken action accordingly.

Most care leavers live in accommodation that meets their needs and increasing numbers of care leavers are benefiting from continuing to live with their foster carers when they leave care. Consequently, they remain in a place where they feel secure and from where they can develop their skills and resilience before becoming more independent. However, a shortage of suitable accommodation for young people with the most complex needs means that the full implementation of their plans may be delayed. Senior leaders are aware of this and are taking appropriate action to resolve this issue.

Many care leavers in West Northamptonshire access education, employment and training. This success has been achieved through improved and closer working relationships between personal advisers, the virtual school, colleges and training providers.

Care leavers now have access to their health histories. This has improved since the 2019 inspection and means that young people have access to important information about their lives and know where to find health advice in the future.

In recognition of previous gaps in mental health provision for care leavers, a new multi-agency public health-funded project has been established to provide much-needed emotional support to care leavers and consultation for staff. This positive development includes the appointment of two care leaver apprentices as part of the team, but it is too soon to see the impact of this.

The care leavers' council, whose members have recently returned to face-to-face meetings, are an impressive and eloquent group of young adults who are passionate about ensuring that all care leavers have access to the right help and support when they need it. Members of the care leavers' council have rightly identified that the local care leaver offer, and their rights and entitlements, are not clear, and this is an area that they are keen to contribute to, including through the corporate parenting board.

The corporate parenting board has been strengthened recently and is showing some signs of impact in improving services and support for care leavers. For example, care

leavers living in West Northamptonshire now receive council tax exemptions. The recent inclusion of additional partners to the board, including housing representatives, is helping to raise awareness of their corporate parenting responsibilities. The board recognises that there is much more to do to improve opportunities and outcomes for care leavers. This includes increasing care leaver representation on the board, improving the local offer for care leavers and increasing the number of apprenticeship and work experience opportunities for care leavers.

Although most workers are positive about the support that they receive from their manager, the frequency and quality of supervision are variable. Records do not consistently include reflection that demonstrates appropriate challenge of plans, the management of potential risk or the escalation of issues that are not promptly resolved for older and disabled children in care and care leavers. This contributes to delays in the progression of their plans.

Senior leaders demonstrate in their recently updated self-assessment that they know their services well and are committed to improving the lives of children and young people. Improvement plans are realistic and continue to be implemented, with success, despite the ongoing challenges of the pandemic. Although workforce stability is better in the leaving care service than in other parts of children's services, there has been some recent turnover of frontline managers and personal advisers. As a result, senior leaders continue with a relentless campaign to 'recruit and retain an awesome workforce'. Senior leaders rightly recognise that without this, consistently high-quality practice and improved experiences for all children and young people in West Northamptonshire will be difficult to achieve.

The comprehensive quality assurance framework provides senior leaders with a clear understanding of children's and young people's experiences, practice strengths and areas for improvement. Staff report positively about their experience of audits and say that the collaborative approach is helping them to reflect and learn. A recently established moderation panel is showing early signs of impact in improving the quality and consistency of audits undertaken by managers. Scrutiny of performance and audit findings is resulting in learning at both operational and strategic levels. The refreshed learning hub disseminates audit findings and good practice examples. This, together with accessible assessment tools, is promoting continued staff development and improving the experiences of children.

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

Yours sincerely

Rachel Griffiths
Her Majesty's Inspector