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Dear Judith

Focused visit to Ealing children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Ealing local authority children's services on 3 and 4 November 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Andy Waugh and Kendra Bell.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for 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 broad range of evidence, including care leavers' records, and undertook case discussions with leaving care workers, social workers and managers. Inspectors spoke to a small number of care leavers and partner agencies. Inspectors also reviewed relevant local authority performance and quality assurance information.

Headline findings

There has been a sustained focus on services for care leavers on the part of senior managers, elected members and partners which has resulted in significant and tangible improvement since the previous judgement inspection in 2019. There is still more to do, but improvements in the quality of individual support for care leavers and the various corporate initiatives have contributed to the overwhelming majority of care leavers in Ealing receiving levels of support consistent with their needs. A dedicated and passionate workforce supports care leavers to make progress and to have positive experiences in their lives. This is underpinned by effective strategic partnership working and a comprehensive local care leaver offer. The progress made has been achieved despite the significant challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite youth unemployment trebling across the borough during the pandemic, it is testament to the strategic partnerships inside and outside the local authority that care leavers have continued to be supported to achieve in education, employment and training.

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

- The review and updating of pathway plans when care leavers' needs change, or risks escalate, to accurately reflect current circumstances.

Main findings

Pathway plans are well written and those co-produced with care leavers provide a very clear insight into the needs of young people. The aspirations, concerns and wishes of care leavers are well evidenced. Identified actions are targeted and appropriately focused to enable and support care leavers to achieve improved outcomes. All actions are collated into one document, providing care leavers with a better understanding of the expectations required of them as well as those others who support them. Risks to most care leavers are well identified and recorded in a separate risk assessment and safety plan that sits alongside pathway plans.

When care leavers' circumstances change, pathway plans are not consistently updated or reviewed to reflect levels of need or risk. This is a deficit.

Partners are committed to developing a multi-agency partnership approach to health services for care leavers. More effective partnership working at a strategic level has commenced and is having a positive impact on health provision for care leavers. Partners are embracing the role of being a corporate parent and are developing initiatives that will more coherently support care leavers. The health needs of care leavers are well considered in strategic plans and there is effective liaison with partners to identify specialist provision when the circumstances of care leavers require it. There is an increase in care leavers who now have access to their health summaries.

The opportunity for leaving care workers to seek consultation with in-house psychology services, or directly refer care leavers for psychological input, further enhances the view that the health needs of care leavers are given a clear priority.

Care leavers who were previously unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and those still seeking asylum receive a high-quality service. Senior leaders and leaving care workers have a good understanding of needs and risks for this cohort of children, recognising the importance of stability and rigorously pursuing young people's 'right to remain' status. There is an appropriate emphasis on accessing education and training opportunities to enable care leavers to make solid foundations and have positive experiences. Senior managers and staff at all levels demonstrate that there is an overarching commitment to promoting equality and inclusion for all care leavers.

Care leavers in custody receive ongoing support, with pathway plans being completed and a focus on planning for when they are released from custody.

The offer to care leavers after they are 21 years old is clearly outlined in the published local offer; however, leaving care workers are not communicating this offer effectively in all cases. As a result, not all care leavers are consistently aware of the services and entitlements they can access.

Since the previous inspection, actions have been taken by leaders to increase the availability and choice of accommodation provision for care leavers. The most vulnerable care leavers are now given priority for specific types of housing. Improved commissioning arrangements, including partnership and joint working with other council services, have led to an increase in the availability of specific housing projects, social housing and private rented options for care leavers. Care Leavers benefit from pre-tenancy training to ensure that they are ready for housing commitments and receive a range of financial support to secure tenancies.

The local authority and partner agencies are committed to ensuring that young people have the right accommodation at the right time. The vast majority of care leavers are in suitable accommodation and where appropriate are encouraged to maintain relationships with family members. The local authority actively supports care leavers remaining with their foster carers until they are ready to move to independence. Children's needs are carefully considered at a matching panel to ensure that care leavers have the right levels of support. Care leavers benefit from council tax exemption within the borough and, for those that move out of borough, their council tax is paid for by the local authority. Where young people are at risk of losing their tenancy, there is significant liaison between housing and the care leavers' service before a decision is made, giving young people the opportunity to make amends. This is reflected in the very low number of care leavers presenting as being at risk of losing their tenancy.

There is a good focus on employment, education and training in pathway plans. Care leavers receive appropriate information, advice and guidance to consider future options and are well supported to access programmes and other activities. Specialist workers are dedicated and tenacious in finding opportunities for care leavers, regardless of ability. The local authority is aspirational for all care leavers and holds annual award ceremonies to celebrate care leavers' achievements. There are a significant number of care leavers attending university who go on to gain valued employment. Financial packages help support care leavers with the costs of living independently and maintaining safe accommodation while studying.

The local authority acknowledges the need to refresh the corporate parenting approach to ensure that the progress of care leavers and the effectiveness of services continue to receive a high priority. The corporate parenting board has demonstrated a commitment to improving the lives of care leavers. Strategic

partnership arrangements are being redeveloped to deliver more effective multi-agency working, with care leavers receiving priority in accessing services.

Care leavers spoken to by inspectors were positive about the service they have received. The emphasis on the development of sustained relationship practice was evident when speaking with them. They described their care workers as caring and supportive. Young people are visited in line with their level of need and risk, and inspectors found evidence that patterns of contact increased according to increased needs or the escalation of risk. Leaving care workers are creative in terms of maintaining contact, and overall, care leavers are well supported by their workers. The emphasis on building relationships with care leavers is a strength of the service.

Staff in the service feel very well supported, with accessible, visible managers and manageable caseloads at a level that enables them to build positive lasting relationships with care leavers. Supervision is held regularly, and most records are detailed and reflect the level of need and the care leavers' current circumstances. Care leavers' workers have access to a comprehensive training programme and are encouraged to attend relevant training courses regularly.

Senior managers and leaders have good insight into the strengths and areas for development for the care leaving service. The local authority has actively sought independent scrutiny and challenge from external sources to identify strengths and areas for development. This learning has been further enhanced through direct consultation with care leavers. This has led to changes in practice, encompassed in action plans that aim to embed high-quality services that will help care leavers achieve their best outcomes. Quality assurance processes provide a clear view of the standard of practice. Managers use weekly performance data effectively to track and monitor progress of work.

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

Yours sincerely

Andy Waugh
Her Majesty's Inspector