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Dear Ms Townsend

Focused visit to Wiltshire children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Wiltshire children's services on 24 and 25 January 2022. The inspectors were Kendra Bell, Her Majesty's Inspector and Steve Lowe, Her Majesty's Inspector.

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

The visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. Inspectors were on site for the duration of the visit. A range of evidence, including case discussions with personal advisers, social workers and managers, was considered. Inspectors also spoke to a number of care leavers and partner agencies, scrutinised performance management and quality assurance information and children and young people's case records.

Headline findings

Care leavers in Wiltshire receive the right support, at the right time, to help them make progress in their lives and a large majority have positive experiences. They are well supported by a passionate, skilled, and stable workforce. Their individual achievements and successes are recognised and celebrated by workers, managers, leaders and elected members who are aspirational for them and share an ambition to be the 'best parents in the country'. Leaders have a good understanding of service strengths and development areas and actively seek scrutiny and challenge from external sources and through regular and varied consultation with care leavers. This leads to plans which drive service improvement and help care leavers achieve their potential.

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

- The frequency of supervision and recording of reflective practice discussion and actions.
- The depth of information gained from audits that focus on the experiences of care leavers, and the extent to which their voices are included in this work to help inform learning and service planning.

Main findings

Care leavers have stable and trusting relationships with their workers and are visited regularly. Their needs are reflected sensitively within pathway plans, most of which are written with them and are clear about what needs to happen and by when. Workers use a range of techniques and communication methods, including the particularly inclusive work carried out by the children and young people's disability team, to support care leavers to share their wishes and feelings. When needed, interpreters are used to help care leavers talk to workers about their needs and experiences and to identify any risks to them. This helps workers access the support and services they need and to help keep them safe.

Identity is generally well understood for care leavers, and this helps inform the support and services they receive. However, for some care leavers, the impact that their care experiences have on them as individuals is not always sufficiently understood or considered. Care leavers who sought or who are still seeking asylum are helped well by specialist workers and a range of community services to help them settle and start their new lives. There is clear focus and emphasis on giving them education and training opportunities and on helping them to achieve stability in all aspects of their lives, including their legal status.

Although pathway plans are almost always reviewed within timescales, they are not always reviewed when important events happen for care leavers to ensure that the current plan reflects changes in their needs and situations. Not all visits to care leavers record the purpose and outcome. Visit records do not always reflect how visits are best used to understand and demonstrate the progress care leavers make.

Care leavers are well supported in accessing the help and services they need to meet their physical and emotional health needs. They have access to their health information and records to allow them to understand both their current health needs and their health histories. They have strong support from their personal advisers and this really benefits their emotional well-being. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, enhanced support to care leavers helped lessen loneliness and the impact of isolation. Care leavers who have limited support networks can access a range of services that provide the longer-term emotional and practical support they need as young adults learning to live independently. Senior leaders know there is more they can do to further build on and improve mental and physical health services for care leavers. Work is under way with health partners to achieve this.

Most care leavers live in safe, stable and suitable accommodation that is well matched to their needs. Effective systems are in place to help senior managers measure and monitor the sufficiency and quality of accommodation. This includes senior managers visiting accommodation to see the quality first-hand. Senior managers and staff from the local authority and a range of relevant agencies work together to prepare care leavers to move to the right accommodation at the right time. This work has resulted in a drop of 50% in homelessness applications from care leavers over the past year. Care leavers are actively encouraged to live with their foster carers or remain in semi-independent living until they are ready to move to independent living. Their needs are carefully considered and reviewed by a dedicated 'destination' panel to make sure they are prepared practically and emotionally and are ready to live in semi-independent and independent accommodation. They are helped by workers and carers to prepare for adulthood and to learn independent living skills, such as managing money, paying bills, laundry, and cooking. They have help to prepare for the responsibility of holding a tenancy and how to maintain it. When care leavers are at risk of losing their tenancy, there is purposeful liaison between housing and care leaver services at an early stage to help care leavers take actions to turn the situation around. Care leavers in Wiltshire are helped to live successfully in independent accommodation and hold secure tenancies because of the preparation and support they receive.

There is a strong focus in pathway plans on education, employment and training. Care leavers receive careers advice and guidance to help them make the right choices for them. They are helped to apply for higher education, training and apprenticeships and given the support they need to stay in their chosen pathway and to succeed. When things do not go well for them or they make the wrong choices, they are helped to understand why and to make new ones. Senior leaders and staff are aspirational for all care leavers and celebrate their achievements through star awards and other events. There are a significant number of care leavers attending further and higher education and they have help with the living costs associated with being a student, and to live in safe accommodation.

The Wiltshire care leaver offer, available as a downloadable app, usefully sets out information on the benefits and entitlements available to care leavers. The offer provides details of practical and financial support, including help with driving lessons and exemption from council tax. Care leavers know that support from their personal adviser is there when they need it, including up to the age of 25. The offer is currently being reviewed with care leavers and a whole-council and community approach is being taken to provide even greater local employment and training opportunities for care leavers.

Senior leaders and members of the council listen to care leavers and proactively and creatively seek their views. The corporate parenting panel is inclusive of care leavers and provides effective scrutiny of the quality and impact of services received by care leavers. An active children in care and care leavers forum, supported by a vibrant

Children and Youth Voice team, provides opportunities for care leavers to influence and shape the support and services they receive. Senior leaders invited and responded quickly to independent scrutiny and feedback from the Department for Education National Implementation Adviser for Care Leavers. This learning involved direct consultation with care leavers and staff and is being used well to shape current improvement plans.

A well-established and stable senior leadership team drives improvement and provides vision and purpose for staff. Effective governance, systems, policies and procedures provide the foundations that support staff to work effectively with care leavers and to help them achieve the best outcomes they can. The emphasis and focus on relationship-based practice with care leavers is a real strength.

Performance management information, complaints, feedback and learning from individual case work is used well to identify strengths, areas for improvement and inform the focus of audit activity. Managers and staff at all levels are actively involved, and learning is taken back into the workforce and actions tracked. However, audit activity does not always include direct feedback from care leavers. This means their voices are not always captured well within audits and so cannot best inform learning and improvement planning. The depth of information gained from audits is too limited to provide the local authority with meaningful insight into the progress and experiences of care leavers.

Management oversight of frontline practice is mostly regular and valued by staff. For a small number of staff, there are gaps in the frequency of supervision, discussion is not always reflective and actions arising are not always clearly set out.

Staff enjoy working in Wiltshire and morale is high. This is having a positive impact on practice and improved outcomes for care leavers. Although busy, most staff have caseloads which are manageable and additional staff have recently been recruited. Staff feel very well supported by visible and approachable senior leaders and managers and speak of a high warmth and high support culture. Staff spoke highly of their training and learning opportunities and are especially positive about the impact recent training has had in helping them to further improve their practice.

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

Yours sincerely

Kendra Bell
Her Majesty's Inspector