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21 March 2022

Ms Julie Jenkins
Director of Children's Services
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Dear Ms Jenkins

Focused visit to Calderdale children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Calderdale children's services on 14 and 15 February 2022. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Victoria Horsefield and Louise Walker.

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. However, the delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. The lead inspector and the director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively on site while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19 and meeting the needs of the local authority's workforce. Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with workers and managers. They also considered local authority performance management, quality assurance information, children's case records and conversations with care leavers.

Headline findings

An ILACS inspection of Calderdale children's services took place in November 2018, when the experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers were found to be outstanding. The local authority brought the care leavers service back in house in March 2021 after they had identified shortfalls in the quality of the service being provided to care leavers. A comprehensive action plan was developed with the aim of delivering an effective and consistent service. However, the difficulties experienced in recruiting and retaining key staff in the pathways service have had an impact on the pace of change. This has meant that not all care leavers have received a service that has consistently met their needs. Senior leaders were aware of many of the issues prior to this visit and are confident that with a full complement of staff, which will be in place over the next two months, rapid and sustained improvement can be made.

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

- The completeness of care leavers' records to fully reflect their current situation.
- The consistency and quality of pathway plans in the pathways service.
- The consistency and quality of supervision in the pathways service to ensure that there is management oversight of the service being provided to young people.
- That the local offer is developed and updated and is made easily accessible to all care leavers.
- The accuracy of data to inform the quality assurance process to assist senior leaders in having an informed oversight of the service.

Main findings

Pathway advisers (the local term for personal advisers) work hard to build trusting relationships with young people. Those young people that have maintained regular contact with a consistent worker receive a service that meets their needs. However, the significant problems experienced by the service in retaining and recruiting workers, alongside the impact of COVID-19, have meant that not all care leavers have received support and intervention from a consistent worker. At a time of increased demand and reduced capacity, managers and workers reported a service that was firefighting to resolve issues on behalf of care leavers. The majority of care leavers spoke positively about the support they had received from their allocated worker. However, some care leavers reported feeling frustrated by the frequent changes of worker, the need to continually repeat their story and not having a consistent person that they could contact.

Since bringing the service back in house, children now remain with the Child Looked After (CLA) team until they reach 18 years old. This means that they have a consistent social worker who understands their lived experiences and can support them through the transition process. Capacity issues within the pathways service have meant that some young people do not have an allocated pathway adviser at 18 years old. These young people have continued to be supported by the CLA team, providing continuity of care. For a small number of children, transition has now started by the time they are 17 years and 6 months, allowing them time to build a relationship with their pathway adviser before turning 18. Senior leaders are confident that with a full complement of staff, which will be in place over the next few weeks, transition planning will be in place for all children prior to their 18th birthday.

When pathways advisers have an established relationship with young people, there was evidence of them being persistent to ensure that young people were in receipt of the right support and services. They act as strong advocates and have established links with services to address young people's mental health, substance misuse and housing issues. Young people moving into their own accommodation as tenants can

have additional support from a tenancy support team to provide practical support and advice on budgeting.

The quality of written pathway plans is inconsistent. Pathway plans for 16- and 17-year-olds developed in the CLA team are detailed and comprehensive, they are written with the child and at their pace, and they contain clear, measurable actions that are regularly reviewed to ensure that progress is being made. Pathway plans developed by the pathway service are of poor quality. The majority of plans do not reflect the care leaver's current circumstances, contain only limited input from the young person and are not informed by a recent assessment of need. This means that care leavers do not have a plan that accurately reflects their lived experiences, their hopes, and future aspirations. Care leavers told inspectors that they did not look at their written plans and rarely got involved in their creation.

Due to some care leavers not being seen on a regular basis, they have not had the opportunity to build a trusting relationship at a crucial point of transition in their life. Over the last two months, there is evidence of a more persistent response by the service to locate young people where contact has not been maintained and to assess what support these young people may require. In addition, the service is now proactively contacting all care leavers aged 21 to 25 that are allocated to a virtual caseload to ensure that they know how to contact the service if they require support. As a result of this, a small number of young people have been identified as requiring additional support and have been allocated to a pathway adviser.

Extensive gaps in young people's records make it difficult to know what interventions and support have been provided to them. Workers can talk about the support they have provided and the depth of discussion they have with care leavers, but this is not reflected in young people's case records. The frequent changes in workers mean that some knowledge and information are no longer available to the service. This means that if young people were to access their records, they would not have a clear understanding of how and why decisions were made. During the visit, senior leaders were made aware of case records being stored outside the case recording system. They took immediate steps to ensure that these are being entered onto young people's case records.

The current care leavers' offer covers the appropriate areas. Nevertheless, as part of the action plan, senior leaders aim to review and refresh the offer in collaboration with young people. Workers routinely inform young people of their entitlements. However, at the time of the visit, the local offer on the council website was out of date. This means that care leavers, especially those over the age of 21 who are not in contact with the service, would not have access to information about their entitlement as a care leaver.

Workers report that they now have access to consistent management support. However, the quality of supervision is not of a consistently good standard. There are extensive gaps in supervision, with some young people not being discussed in formal supervision for several months. There is limited recording of any case discussion, and

most actions are task-focused. Actions from the last supervision are pulled through but these are largely irrelevant given the lengthy gaps in between supervision sessions. Supervision is not providing workers with the opportunity to reflect on the work they are undertaking and does not provide evidence that plans are being progressed. To provide additional management oversight, the current manager has introduced daily team case discussions. Unfortunately, these are not recorded on the young person's case records.

Workers that inspectors spoke to were committed to providing care leavers with a good standard of service. They were keen to be part of the improvement journey and were confident that the service was on an upward trajectory. They reported that staff morale was improving and were looking forward to having a full complement of staff in post over the next two months. Caseloads, they reported, were beginning to come down to a manageable level, enabling them to undertake meaningful work with their allocated young people.

Senior leaders are provided with an extensive array of data that includes performance information for the pathways service. However, data reliability is linked to the accuracy of case recording and inaccuracies in the data provided were found during the visit. There is a comprehensive quality assurance process that triangulates information from a number of sources. Senior leaders and workers are provided with regular feedback on the learning from audits. However, no recent audits have been undertaken on cases in the pathways service. This, coupled with the inaccuracy in the performance data, means that senior leaders cannot be assured that they have a grip on the quality of service being provided to care leavers.

There continues to be a commitment at both a corporate and political level, with both resources and investment targeted to children's services. Senior leaders and members take their role as corporate parents/grandparents seriously. They engage with young people and are committed to working alongside them to refresh the Care Leaver Pledge and the care leaver local offer.

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

Yours sincerely

Victoria Horsefield
Her Majesty's Inspector