

17 June 2022

Dr Lee-Anne Farach
Director of People
Medway Council
Gun Wharf
Dock Road
Chatham
Kent ME4 4TR

Dear Lee-Anne

Monitoring visit to Medway children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Medway children's services on 11 and 12 May 2022. This was the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in August 2019. Her Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Rachel Griffiths and Sarah Canto.

Areas covered by the visit

During this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made since the last full inspection 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.
- Planning and preparation for adulthood.
- The quality and impact of pathway plans and of management oversight and supervision.
- The quality and impact of support and interventions for all care leavers.
- The effectiveness of senior leaders, including quality assurance processes.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. Inspectors were on site during this visit. They spoke with care leavers, older children in care, personal advisers, social workers, managers and leaders. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information, and children and young people's case records.

Headline findings

Senior leaders continue to focus purposefully on their improvement journey. As a result, significant progress has been made since the previous inspection in 2019 in relation to services for older children in care and care leavers. A 16 plus service has

been formed. A care-leaver hub has opened. There is increased capacity in the service, resulting in personal advisers having reduced caseloads and more time to spend with young people.

Despite this progress, senior leaders know that areas remain that still require further improvement. The quality of practice, and impact of this on young people, remains inconsistent. Mental health services for older children and young people require development. Sufficiency and choice of accommodation for young people with the most complex needs remain too limited.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Personal advisers are committed, caring and passionate about their work. They know their young people well. They persist in developing positive relationships, resulting in young people having a trusted adult who they know they can rely on. A care leaver explained to inspectors about her personal adviser: 'She is the mum I never had.'

Visits take place to care leavers as a minimum within statutory timescales and more often if need dictates. Young people reported feeling secure knowing their personal adviser will always respond promptly and flexibly to their needs.

The care-leaver hub is a welcoming and homely environment. It is a safe place where young people meet, socialise, attend groups and access support from the 16 plus workers. However, not all young people can access the hub as it opens during office hours, precluding those in full-time education and training from attending. The local authority has plans to extend the hub's opening hours.

Transition planning for older children in care is inconsistent and does not always start early enough. As a consequence, some older children in care move on to the next stage of their life in a rushed or unplanned way. Sometimes, they are not well equipped for the pressures of adult life and living more independently.

The positive relationships young people have with their social workers and personal advisers provide them with a layer of safety. However, this is not consistently supported by an effective written safety plan. This means that some of the most vulnerable young people, for example those at risk of exploitation, and the people

who are important to them, do not have a clear action plan of how best to promote their safety.

Young people who are in custody are helped by their personal advisers, with timely visits, telephone calls, financial support, advocacy and exit planning. This helps towards a smooth transition when their prison sentence comes to an end.

Care leavers who are pregnant or who are parents benefit from the help and support they receive from a specialist parenting support worker. For some young parents, this valuable support has assisted them and their child in remaining together.

Some care leavers over the age of 21 receive effective support from a personal adviser. However, until very recently, other care leavers over the age of 21 were open to a virtual duty system. This was not sufficient to meet their needs. As a result, this system has now been replaced so that all care leavers who need or want ongoing support after they turn 21, can continue to receive this from an allocated personal adviser. This very recent change is yet to be fully embedded or to demonstrate impact.

Young people's pathway plans, mostly written with young people's input, are kept up to date. The quality and impact of these plans are variable. Young people's identity and unique characteristics are usually identified. However, their emotional needs or complexities linked to family history or trauma are sometimes insufficiently analysed to ensure that the right level and type of support are provided at the right time.

Social workers and personal advisers value the level of support and supervision they receive from their managers. Supervision occurs regularly and is timely. However, the quality of written supervision records varies. Better ones are more reflective and have timescales to achieve progress. Weaker ones are largely descriptive and lack managerial challenge to improve the planning for successful independence in adulthood.

Positively, most care leavers live in suitable accommodation. Despite this, sufficiency challenges remain, meaning there is a lack of choice of accommodation for the most complex young people as they reach adulthood and beyond. Addressing this challenge is an absolute priority for senior leaders. Currently, for the small number of young people living in emergency, temporary, unregistered or unregulated placements, increased management oversight of these arrangements is helping to ensure that young people are safe and getting the help they need while more suitable accommodation is being sought.

A good number of care leavers benefit from continuing to live with their foster carers when they turn 18. This provides them with a secure base from where they can develop their skills and resilience before becoming more independent.

More care leavers in Medway are accessing and succeeding in education, employment and training than the national average. This is significant progress since

the previous inspection and demonstrates the positive impact of a new aspirations officer and increased capacity within the virtual school to support care leavers.

Care leavers now receive their health histories when they turn 18. Again, this is progress since the previous inspection. It means that young people have important information about their lives and where to access health advice in the future should they need this.

Mental health services have been insufficient to help older children in care and care leavers address their significant needs in this area. Demand for such services has been exacerbated during the pandemic. This gap seriously impacts on young people's quality of life as they progress into adulthood. Care leavers shared with inspectors their dissatisfaction and frustration about the lack of specialist provision to help them. They have requested either a bespoke mental health service or a specialist worker within the 16 plus service to help meet this unmet need.

The stable senior leadership team, with strong political support, remains determined to create sustainable improved services for all children and young people in Medway. The authority's self-assessment is accurate and demonstrates how well leaders know their service and what they still need to do to achieve their goals. Robust audit and moderation processes contribute to this, providing leaders with an accurate understanding of practice in Medway. A focus now, with the support of increased quality assurance activities, is to work to further close the feedback and action loop following audit activity.

A well-organised corporate parenting board, with members who listen carefully to the views of the highly impressive Children in Care Council, continues with its commitment to fulfil its corporate responsibilities. A delivery board is currently working to create greater opportunities and experiences for care leavers, through a 'family business model'. The aim is to create an even more comprehensive care-leaver offer through increased concessions, mentoring, work experience, taster sessions and apprenticeship opportunities, with every council member doing their part as corporate parents. It is too early to see the impact of this ambitious vision.

Improved workforce stability and increased capacity in the 16 plus service have resulted in workers having lower caseloads, and more time to build consistent relationships with young people. While this is positive, stability and capacity in the service remain fragile. A number of posts remain temporary. The increasing complexity of young people's needs in light of the pandemic and the rising cost of living means that they need support from their workers, leading to increased demands on worker capacity. Additionally, there is not sufficient capacity within the service to enable personal advisers to be allocated earlier to older children in care, as the local authority aspires to do, to enable more focused transitions planning to take place.

Despite these challenges, workers in the 16 plus service are positive about working in Medway. Along with leaders, they are absolutely committed to improving the

experiences of the young people they work with to give them the best chance of success in their adult life.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Rachel Griffiths
Her Majesty's Inspector