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Dear Janice

Monitoring visit to North East Lincolnshire children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to North East Lincolnshire children's services on 8 February and 9 February 2023. This was the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in October 2021. His Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Louise Hollick and Kathryn Grindrod.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- Care leavers aged 16 and 17, and care leavers aged 18 to 25.
- Learning and employment opportunities.
- Preparation for future independence, including the role of the personal adviser.
- Quality and suitability of accommodation.
- Ability to influence the services they are offered.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Headline findings

While services for care experienced children and young people in North East Lincolnshire have remained of a similar standard since the last inspection, inspectors found evidence of leaders having a more accurate evaluation of practice in this area.

The care leavers' service has a more stable and permanent workforce than other service areas in the local authority. This stability ensures that most care experienced children and young people benefit from building secure relationships with their allocated worker, and planning is more effective in helping improve their outcomes.

The majority of care experienced children and young people with an allocated worker receive appropriate assessments, support and assistance. However, for some care experienced young people who do not have a named allocated worker, who are over 21, or who are missing, support and communication is not proactive or regular enough.

Since the last monitoring visit, the senior leadership team has been strengthened and an enhanced level of sector-led improvement partnership work is in place. Leaders recognise the need to increase political and corporate understanding, scrutiny and continued investment, to ensure that there are the right conditions and infrastructure to drive the whole service improvements that are required.

Findings and evaluation of progress

During this visit, inspectors' findings were in line with leaders' recent self-evaluation of the care leavers' service and reflected discussions held with political members and senior leaders. This is positive in demonstrating that corporate leaders are beginning to understand the key strengths and the areas for development within the services offered to care experienced children and young people.

Very recently, leaders have strengthened the quality assurance framework and are in the process of implementing a new strategy and collaborative audit tools. Accurate audits completed on care leavers' case files and plans are helping leaders understand the quality of practice and planning for this group of children and young people. Audits are also capturing wider learning for the organisation. As a result, leaders have implemented new processes or have updated policies to improve the experiences for a wider number of care experienced children and young people in the future.

Care experienced children and young people have regular health assessments and most have their health needs identified and met. Workers accompany children and young people to health appointments when needed. This ensures that children and young people are supported in accessing the right health services and that they are helped to understand the implications of any health advice or treatments.

Personal advisers (PAs) build strong relationships with children and young people, and they openly discuss any ongoing or emerging health needs. They have a good awareness of children and young people's emotional needs, and the impact of any past traumatic experiences. PAs can tailor support and refer for therapeutic work when required. There are various services available to support care experienced children and young people that are assisting them in improving their emotional and mental well-being.

In the recent past, proactive action to ensure that eligible children are in education, employment or training (EET) has not been robust or effective. There is now more recognition and drive by workers to improve the EET offer for care experienced

children and young people. For the majority of care experienced children and young people who are in employment or education, it is appropriate for their needs. There is good understanding of their educational progress and their future ambitions, along with the right support. When young people are not able to work or study because of their needs, PAs seek activities that interest young people to try and develop their skills and occupy their time.

A lack of pre-emptive planning for children in long-term care means that PAs from the 'new futures' team are not always allocated until children are nearing 18. Children's allocated social workers in the children in care teams are therefore responsible for most early independence planning. High staff turnover in these teams and conflicting priorities in social workers' caseloads mean that some social workers are not visiting at the same frequency as PAs do, and they do not always have a full understanding of care leavers' rights and entitlements.

Once children or young people are allocated a PA, they benefit from more frequent visiting and a high level of support. PAs carefully consider the young person's abilities and encourage them to become more independent at a pace that is right for them. PAs speak warmly about their young people, they are committed to supporting them, and take pride in their achievements. They help them practically, such as decorating their homes, or taking them shopping. They communicate with young people frequently, although the recorded case notes do not always reflect this. A well-resourced hub space holds regular drop-in sessions and fortnightly Sunday lunches to enable care experienced children and young people to access informal practical support, food parcels and hot meals, as well as social activities.

Most care experienced young people who have an allocated social worker or PA live in suitable accommodation where they are settled and feel happy. For young people receiving universal credit, they do not meet the affordability criteria for social housing rented properties, meaning they can struggle to secure their own tenancy. Leaders are aware of this and are working towards a resolution for some individual young people. Leaders have not fully addressed this at a corporate level with the local housing provider to ensure that there is a strategic partnership agreement and policy for future housing applications.

Pathway assessments and plans are of variable quality. While they capture the main themes for the child or young person, they do not always result in effective action plans, meaning children and young people may not be clear about what needs to happen next, what support they should be receiving and when. Most pathway plans do not consider contingency planning to provide clarity on what will happen should the needs or circumstances of the child or young person change.

On an individual basis, some care experienced young people do influence the support and services they receive. PAs take time to listen to young people and act on what they are told. There is a lack of formal voice, influence and participation activities for care experienced young people to meet with senior leaders and influence changes in

policy or the local authority's offer. Leaders are aware of the need to do more in this regard.

The local offer for care experienced young people meets required government guidance, and most children and young people are aware of their entitlements as set out in the offer. While statutory entitlements are in place, there are some areas where the offer lacks consistency. For example, some young people are disadvantaged because they were placed in care outside of the local authority's boundaries. This is where they continue to reside and, therefore, do not receive a council tax exemption.

For care experienced children and young people who go missing, there is a lack of proactive enquiries from the new futures team to find them quickly and ensure that they are safe and well. Inspectors found a small number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people who had been missing from care for several months without sufficient attempts to track them down and visit them. This leaves children and young people at potential harm from exploitation or trafficking.

Most care experienced young people are considered whether they still need an allocated worker when they reach the age of 21. Subsequently, many of them no longer have an allocated PA and are put on a 'staying connected' list. The responsibility is on the individual to actively contact a duty worker should they need further assistance, rather than the workers proactively and regularly checking in with them and ascertaining any ongoing needs.

Previous poor decision-making and some inaccurate system recordings about young people's eligibility criteria mean that not all qualifying care experienced young people are open to PAs or have active pathway plans. As a result, there are some care experienced young people who may be in need of advice and assistance, or have entitlements to leaving care services, who are not kept in touch with or receiving the level of support they need.

The quality of supervision and management decision-making is inconsistent. Supervision is described by workers as helpful, but it does not always focus on young people's experiences or what could be done more effectively. Supervision is not always frequent enough when there are complex issues or when young people are in crisis, meaning that workers do not always have management advice in managing difficult situations.

Inspectors continue to see the impact from high staff turnover and multiple changes of social worker prior to children reaching the new futures team. Leaders are attempting to address workforce instability and have recently recruited a number of new social workers from overseas, and some newly qualified social workers. These new social workers are benefiting from a well-managed induction period to enable them to develop their skills and knowledge at an appropriate pace before they take on full caseloads.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Louise Hollick
His Majesty's Inspector