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Dear Martin

Focused visit to York City Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to York City Council children's services on 1 to 2 August 2023. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Louise Walker and Cath Heron.

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. Inspectors were on site and met with practitioners, managers and young people.

Headline findings

Care leavers are very well supported by staff, with whom they have stable and trusted relationships. They are supported effectively into adulthood by workers who are emotionally invested in them. Care leavers are involved from an early stage in the decisions which affect them. They are helped to understand their rights and entitlements. Those who wish to become involved in service and practice developments are actively encouraged to do so.

Senior leaders have created a culture across the council in which care leavers are valued and are given a high priority status. Senior leaders and members are strong and active corporate parents, who are committed to improving the lives of care leavers. Leaders value opportunities to engage with young people and understand their views and perspectives, treating them as experts. This puts young people at the centre of decision-making and service development.

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

- The consistency and recording of case supervision and key decision-making in young persons' lives.

- The timely updating of pathway plans where appropriate and when care leavers needs change.

Main findings

Most children in care are allocated a pathway practitioner in a timescale that enables relationships to be developed before they leave care. Where it is identified that a child would benefit from earlier allocation to support longer introduction times, this is facilitated.

Care leavers benefit from a stable and consistent pathway workforce, which means many have had the same worker for a number of years. The young people inspectors spoke with described workers in the service as dependable, reliable and committed. This means that trusted and lasting relationships have developed that are meaningful to young people.

Pathway workers understand care leavers' background experiences and approach difficult conversations with sensitivity and respect. Staff demonstrate a good insight into young people's needs, potential risks and vulnerabilities and use this knowledge to provide the right interventions and support.

Keeping in touch meaningfully with care leavers is given high priority. This reflects the local authority's ethos of 'is this good enough for my child?' The frequency of keeping in touch is based on young people's individual needs and wishes.

Young people and care leavers receive high levels of emotional and practical support from their pathway workers, for example support to attend appointments, help to learn new skills and in setting up home. This helps them to make progress through significant changes in their lives and manage stressful life events.

Care leavers told inspectors that the pathway team goes 'above and beyond'. Inspectors saw evidence of support being provided for young people through significant life events and staff celebrating individual care leaver's successes and achievements that were important to them. These meaningful relationships are essential to care leavers' networks and their sense of belonging, which one young person described as being like 'one big family'.

Care leavers are listened to and understood by their workers. Their views inform their plans and the decisions that are made about them. However, written records do not always capture the detailed rationale for some decisions. This may mean that when young people access their records later in life, the reason for some decisions are unclear. Most workers spoken with were able to articulate the work that they are doing with young people very well, but this was not always reflected in records. Not all pathway plans are completed in a timely way following needs assessments.

Staff provide sensitive support and commit to understanding the unique characteristics and needs of unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people leaving care. They consider the links young people have with relatives or communities across the country and support them to strengthen these safely, or to make new links. The language and cultural needs of young people are taken into account when resources are developed to enable them to easily access important information.

Care leavers who are parents are well supported by the pathway service to be the best parents they can be. If safeguarding concerns arise, there is effective working between the pathway service and their child's social worker. Care leavers are helped to participate in meetings and contribute to planning for their child.

Care leavers are supported to know their rights and entitlements. They are empowered to influence and be part of decision-making. Their views are valued by senior leaders and are used to influence service development. Through a range of consultations and discussion groups, care leavers are supported to express their opinions and affect change. The participation and advocacy offer in York is a real strength, and this has supported young people to co-design and deliver a range of resources and events. The local offer to care leavers is currently being reviewed and some young people and care leavers are engaged in the co-production of this.

Recent changes in the senior leadership team have created more stability within the workforce. Managers reported that this is promoting consistency of practice and supporting their professional development. Staff spoken to during this visit are clear about expectations of them and the support available to them.

The senior management team knows the service well and has already identified areas that need to be strengthened. There is a strong focus on the importance of good social work practice and values being driven through the senior leadership team, whose members lead by example.

The new practice model is promoting discussion and reflection about individual young people. In particular, this approach is changing thinking around risk management and family reunification where it is safe to do. The workers inspectors met with speak positively about the changes in the organisation's leadership, practice developments and organisational culture.

Workers inspectors met with describe managers as approachable and visible. Workers value the 'Stop the clock' days, which give them space to meet as a team, undertake development activities and keep young people's records up to date.

In the pathway service, inspectors saw that for some workers case supervision takes place more frequently when children's circumstances change or are fragile. This gives workers clear direction and provides oversight of decisions to be reached. This was not always evident in supervision records in the social work teams.

The quality assurance framework is well understood by managers. The tool to support learning conversations is designed to facilitate and capture reflective discussions between the auditor and the practitioner to identify any areas of practice that need to be strengthened.

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

Yours sincerely

Louise Walker
His Majesty's Inspector