

31 October 2023

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Topsham Road
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Dear Stuart

Monitoring visit to Devon children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Devon children's services on 26 and 27 September 2023. The visit was the sixth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in January 2020. His Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Steve Lowe and Nhlanganiso Nyathi.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the quality and impact of services for care leavers, with a particular focus on the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- Services to care leavers, including sufficiency of accommodation and support available for young people, the assessment of risk and safety planning for young people.
- Senior management understanding and oversight of areas for improvement in the care leaver service.
- Strategic oversight and grip on areas for improvement and oversight of senior leaders, including case audits and supervision.

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

Headline findings

Too many care leavers live in hotels and other unsuitable accommodation, often moving several times before they are found more suitable places to live. In the interim, they are very vulnerable. Without the stability of a safe home, these care leavers make limited progress in other areas of their life. Personal advisors (PAs) respond to these crises with urgency, but without the advantage of updated assessment and planning. There is still insufficient accommodation to meet the varied needs of Devon's care leavers, as there was at the point of the 2020

inspection. This remains a wider strategic issue for the whole council, local political partners and those agencies with a duty to safeguard Devon's children, and without a concerted, corporate approach it is unlikely to improve.

Similarly, the number of care leavers not in education, employment or training remains approximately 10% higher than the national average. This diminishes life chances for these young people. For disabled care leavers and the most vulnerable, education is often sacrificed too readily in favour of a focus on prevailing medical or accommodation concerns. Engagement with the wider Devon community to provide supported options for care leavers has been slow.

However, the issues above are now more fully understood by senior leaders and there are now plans in place to remedy the situation, which is a clear improvement. The transition from one senior leadership team to another has not slowed down progress against the improvement plan but is yet to translate into a significant impact on the lives of care leavers. Staff describe a positive change in culture, characterised by a significant improvement in senior management oversight and interest. The impact of the voice of children and young people is improving. Increasingly, this is filtering through to practice through more effective challenge and role modelling by managers.

In particular, the restorative approach and associated practice model have been welcomed by staff and there is increasing evidence of these being used successfully. This thread bridges successive leadership teams and staff recognise it as a framework for further improvement.

Findings and evaluation of progress

PAs are increasingly involved in planning for care leavers' futures from age 16 and work effectively alongside social workers to form positive relationships that often endure well beyond age 18. When this happens, care leavers develop meaningful relationships with their PAs. Many young people who have stability, including staying with their foster carers into adulthood and a consistent PA, do well. This includes financial and emotional support that meets care leavers' needs and respect for their emerging identities as adults. PAs largely achieve a successful balance between support, advice and promoting independence and privacy, and ongoing discussion with young people about the right level of support.

However, there is largely reactive practice when there are crises. Planning is short-term and not focused on achievable goals. Assessments are not routine when young people's circumstances change, and plans are not updated in a timely way. As a result, contingency planning is often weak and care leavers are unsure about their future. The underlying reasons for young people's trauma and current choices are not applied to planning successfully. The upcoming introduction of specialist mental health practitioners in the permanence and transition teams is a direct response to this gap, but it is too early to evidence any positive impact. However, records are written to the young person in a sensitive but honest way, and attempts to involve them in their own plans are often creative.

Care leavers still do not have routine and easy access to their health histories beyond the point where they are first provided with them. This has a particular impact on those young people who move several times and who suffer traumatic experiences or issues with their mental health.

Care leavers' understanding of their rights and entitlements is variable. While some PAs refer to discussing these as and when specific issues arise, other PAs discuss these routinely. In practice, however, young people do mostly receive the support they need when they need it, including help with transport, equipment and applications for housing and benefits. The care leavers' offer is due to be relaunched to increase parity and awareness, especially with those care leavers who are not regularly in touch with their PAs.

Care leavers who are, or were, unaccompanied asylum seekers are supported well. PAs and social workers assist them to follow their aspirations, live close to peers and integrate more fully into their local communities. Legal applications are successful in achieving the right to remain in the UK and to move towards UK citizenship where this is the young person's wish.

When young people become homeless, they are moved several times between different hotels or temporary accommodation. Although contact from their PA increases at this time, there is no clear policy of expectation in terms of visiting or any additional support given their vulnerability. As a result, each of the places they stay is not always recorded, seen or assessed.

The oversight of senior managers has improved when young people are at risk of becoming, or become, homeless, but timely resolutions linked to this oversight are inconsistent. Crucially, weekly meetings of decision-makers from key agencies have been established. There is some progress once this is triggered, including problem-solving and escalation to decision-makers in partner agencies. As a result, an increasing number of care leavers are helped into more stable living arrangements because of this process. However, they remain in temporary accommodation, including hotels, for longer than necessary because of tension and inconsistency between Devon County Council and the district councils and the lack of a combined, ambitious sufficiency strategy.

Education, employment and training (EET) for care leavers, including those with disabilities, is not sufficiently prioritised, particularly in supervision and subsequent planning. For example, some disabled care leavers with A levels have no transition plan into meaningful education or employment. While the dedicated EET PAs work hard to identify possibilities for young people, there is insufficient support to help them make sustained progress. The volume of apprenticeships and work experience in 'the family business' (departments within the council and through links with the wider business community) is too low. Corporate and political leaders do now have targets for increasing these opportunities, and a more sophisticated approach to matching young people's aspirations with offers of work from the wider community is in the early stages of development.

Supervision is not always regular and can often lack any reflection or analysis, although some PAs report an increase in reflection and management oversight more recently as management capacity increases.

When former relevant and qualifying care leavers who have chosen not to keep in touch seek out support, PAs are largely proactive in providing an extended offer. This includes an allocation of a PA, and the undertaking of new pathway plans to enable an understanding of the young person's needs.

The Reducing Exploitation and Absence from Care or Home (REACH) team, which specialises in reducing the risk of exploitation, continues to have success when allocated to work with individual children. An increased focus on research, demographics and underlying vulnerabilities is helping to inform responses to the wider community of care leavers, although this is relatively recent. The approach to contextual safeguarding is developing with the support of a dedicated analyst and intelligence-sharing for under 18s becoming more routine. However, for those care leavers in hotels, for example, the link to commissioning and locality risk assessments is under developed, as are links with the providers of accommodation, local communities and partners to fully understand the risks of unsafe places and spaces in Devon.

PAs spoken to describe a positive shift of culture and change characterised by a substantial improvement in senior management oversight and scrutiny over the last six months. Managers are now more visible and, although caseloads are still high, they describe their work as manageable. While overall the use of agency staff is still high in the authority, this is less so with PAs and there is slow but steady progress in securing a more permanent workforce.

Total Respect training, delivered by care leavers and focused on the things that are important to them, is making a positive difference to practice, and fits in well with the continued focus on restorative approaches with young people. A well-understood and applied practice model has gained traction with staff and is a stabilising factor during ongoing change.

Quality assurance, including audits, have yet to make a substantial impact on practice for this group of young people but the plan for increasing volume, standardisation of what 'good' looks like and the sharing of themes is making steady progress from a very low starting point.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Steve Lowe
His Majesty's Inspector