

6 December 2023
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Dear Jeanette

Monitoring visit to Bury children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Bury children's services on 1 and 2 November 2023. This was the fifth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in November 2021. His Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Lisa Walsh and Rebekah Tucker. Sophie Wales, His Majesty's Inspector designate, shadowed the inspection.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made for care leavers in relation to the following areas:

- pathway planning
- employment, education and training
- support into adulthood, including for vulnerable groups
- health and emotional well-being.

In the rest of this letter, care leavers are referred to as care-experienced young people because this is the preferred term in the local authority.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. A range of evidence was considered, including electronic records, performance management information, case file audits and other information provided by senior managers. In addition, inspectors spoke to care-experienced young people, social workers, personal advisers and managers.

Headline findings

This is the fifth monitoring visit since the inspection in November 2021. External reviews of the care-experienced service in November 2022 and May 2023 provided leaders with a comprehensive understanding of the areas for improvement, resulting

in a clear and appropriately focused plan. However, there has been a delay in implementing the changes needed and as a result outcomes for care-experienced young people remain too inconsistent.

Progress has been hindered by a lack of management capacity at both service manager and assistant director level to implement the improvement plans. A performance culture is not embedded and although leaders have commissioned external moderation to provide additional oversight of frontline practice, there has been a reduced line of sight and a small number of care-experienced young people have not been receiving the support that they are entitled to.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Not all care-experienced young people receive a consistent response to meet their needs. A small number have not been receiving a service at all. This was not known to senior leaders prior to the visit. These young people, who are entitled to receive services as care leavers, have not been allocated a personal adviser (PA) to keep in touch with them regularly. Some have not been contacted by the local authority for over two years. These young people have not benefited from regular review, management oversight and direction, and as such there is not current understanding of their needs and any risks.

Most young people have the opportunity to get to know their PA before they are 18 years old, usually at 16. This provides PAs with the opportunity to understand their whole history and build a relationship with young people prior to their transition into adulthood.

Most care-experienced young people benefit from PAs who build strong relationships with them. PAs make frequent visits in line with care-experienced young people's needs, whether they live within or outside of Bury. PAs are persistent in maintaining contact in between visits, using various methods to support young people's well-being and safety at times of crisis.

Care-experienced young people aged over 21 continue to receive support from their PAs should they still have a need and when they want the support to continue.

The quality of pathways plans is too variable. While most are completed in collaboration with young people, some plans are too long and they are not easy to understand. Some pathway plans are not clear enough to support young people's understanding of the help that they will receive. Plans are not routinely updated in a timely manner or when there has been a significant change in the young person's circumstances. The consideration of young people's identity is not consistently present within plans, which is fundamental to ensure that all needs are identified and supported.

When young people have additional needs, such as a disability, or if English is not their first language, plans are not always accessible to support these specific needs.

Some pathway plans are of better quality. These plans are aspirational and provide clarity about how young people will be supported to reach their potential.

The support available to young people in relation to their education, employment and training needs is inconsistent. For some young people, there is a lack of aspiration and creative thinking by PAs around supporting them back into education, employment and training (EET). This impacts on young people's educational outcomes. Care-experienced young people receive a better service when PAs work collaboratively with education providers and the post-16 EET worker. This supports young people to access appropriate education and employment opportunities, which has a positive impact on their emotional well-being and self-esteem. When care-experienced young people attend university, they receive appropriately tailored financial packages to support them with the costs of living independently and maintaining accommodation while studying.

Care-experienced young people's ability to access emotional and mental health support in Bury is a challenge. Despite a new protocol between the local authority and child and adolescent mental health services to support the reduction of waiting times, some young people still wait too long to access mental health services. PAs' responses to supporting young people with their emotional health are inconsistent. Some PAs proactively support young people to access services by attending appointments with them, whereas others take a more remote approach of signposting young people to access the support themselves, when they would have benefited from more one-to-one support.

Care-experienced young people are not consistently provided with their health histories or information when they turn 18 years of age. This means that they do not have important information about their lives or know where to access health advice in the future should they need this. This was an identified area for improvement at the last inspection.

Most care-experienced young people are living in suitable accommodation. PAs and a specialist tenancy officer work collaboratively to support many young people to secure independent tenancies, increasing opportunities for stability. However, a small number of young people spoken to said that they do not have a choice about where they live and for some this means that they did not feel safe in their current accommodation. They said: 'We don't get the accommodation we deserve. This is because of the strategic disconnect between housing and the local authority, prioritising the accommodation needs of care-experienced young people'. Senior leaders understand the impact of this gap in housing provision and know that there is more work to do to strengthen strategic partnerships. While senior leaders have identified the plans to address this shortfall, a lack of management capacity has delayed implementation.

When young people are not ready to live independently where possible, their care planning considers and supports them to stay with their former carers, within

'staying put' arrangements. For many, this supports young people to maintain important relationships and continue to benefit from and enjoy family life.

When young people who are unaccompanied asylum seekers become care leavers, they receive positive and skilled support from their PAs, including in their education, employment and training. Young people's identity, health and emotional needs are well considered and met. PAs recognise the importance of stability and promptly secure appropriate legal advice where appropriate to support claims for asylum.

For care-experienced young people who are in custody, PAs maintain contact through regular visiting. There is a joint approach with the probation service to identify accommodation for young people on release from prison. However, for some this is taking too long, and this leaves young people uncertain about where they are going to live when they leave custody.

The local offer to care-experienced young people meets statutory requirements. Some PAs and social workers are not aware of the detail of the offer, which means that some young people are not fully supported to understand the offer and access what they are entitled to. Some young people are missing essential documentation, such as passports or identification, and therefore do not have access to a bank account. This means that some young people experience inequity in how their rights and entitlements are met.

PAs receive regular supervision but the quality of this is inconsistent. Most records are task-focused, with more of an emphasis on compliance instead of the experiences of young people. Some records are not sufficiently detailed and do not always recognise where there is weaker practice. There is a lack of challenge and accountability for PAs from managers to support the effective progress of young people's plans.

The senior leadership team has experienced some instability and changes, which is impacting on staff morale in the care-experienced service. Staff report feeling a disconnect with senior leaders due to a lack of communication and a lack of clarity about the direction in which the service is heading. At the time of the monitoring visit, an interim head of this service and an interim director of practice had recently started in their roles. It is too soon to see the impact of these appointments.

Some PAs do not have an appropriate induction and access to sufficient training opportunities to support them to understand the complexity, experiences and needs of young people.

The quality assurance framework, albeit well established, is not consistently supporting the improvement of practice and positive outcomes for care-experienced young people. The inconsistent quality of auditing means that senior leaders do not have an accurate understanding of the quality of day-to-day practice.

Senior leaders have understood the need for and commissioned external review to provide greater rigour and independence to the quality assurance of practice, while a culture of performance management embeds across the service. The external review has provided senior leaders with a clear understanding of areas of strength and what needs to improve. However, resulting actions have not been fully implemented and the pace of change has been hindered by a lack of management oversight and direction.

Senior leaders recognise there is more to do and at a greater pace to ensure that care-experienced young people in Bury receive a consistently good service.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Lisa Walsh
His Majesty's Inspector