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Dear Cathi

Monitoring visit to Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole children's services on 29 and 30 November 2023. This was the fifth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in December 2021. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Tracey Ledder and Sarah Canto.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made to services for children and young people who are care leavers, with a particular focus on the following areas in need of improvement identified at the last inspection:

- The quality and frequency of visits and support provided to young people by their social worker or their personal adviser (PA).
- The timeliness of children and young people being allocated a PA and whether they experience multiple changes of their social worker or PA due to staff turnover.
- Whether children and young people are provided with their health histories.
- The quality of pathway plans and the involvement of children and young people in the development of their plans.
- The consistency of support provided to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people.

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

Headline findings

Senior leaders continue to implement their improvement plan and are working to raise the quality of services provided to children and care-experienced young people (care leavers) in Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP Council). While some progress has been made since the time of the last inspection, senior leaders are under no illusion that there is still much more that needs to be done before all young people receive a good and consistent service. Senior leaders know the strengths and areas of development required of the service and continue to work towards full implementation of their improvement plan with the support of improvement partners. There is a commitment from children's services staff and leaders to do better, but not enough has been achieved against the areas in need of improvement identified at the last inspection for children to receive the quality of support the local authority aspires to provide them with.

The local authority and partner agencies, as corporate parents, are not yet fully aligned in working to improve services for care-experienced young people, and this is acting as a brake on the pace of improvement. As a consequence of this lack of a sufficient whole-council and partnership approach, improvement is not yet being achieved in a consistent, timely and systemic way and is not always matched to children's and young people's needs and priorities.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Most children are allocated a PA too late due to staffing pressures. This prevents them from making relationships with PAs and receiving the help and support they require at the earliest possible stage. The quality of planning between social workers and PAs is inconsistent. As a result, PAs are not always equipped with the information and details they require when they first meet children and young people.

Most young people have positive relationships with their PAs and they know how to reach them should they need help, advice or support. Children and young people have access to a welcoming accessible safe space, known as The Hub, throughout the week, where they can access PAs and some partners such as education and advocacy services, to get help or just have a snack and a drink. PAs facilitate several additional initiatives that benefit young people on many levels. For example, children and young people are proud of their football team. Being a part of this team provides them with a sense of belonging and pride and continues to help them to establish themselves in the local community and supports them to achieve goals and aspirations. The Hub initiative provides opportunities for care-experienced young people to meet with their peers, PAs and partner agencies, who offer support about education, finances and housing options. The building is a welcoming, creative hub that promotes a collaborative environment in which young people feel listened to and safe. The Hub stands out as an exemplar of good practice.

Many children and young people benefit from PAs who keep in touch with them and visit them on a regular basis. However, some children and young people have not been seen by their PAs or social workers for many weeks and, in some cases, months. There is not always sufficient persistence in trying to find and support these young people. Nor is there always enough professional curiosity, which means that they could be left in situations that are not good for their well-being or at possible risk of harm.

A very small number of children and young people are not allocated to a PA or social worker when they should be. This means that there is a lack of consistent and dedicated oversight and continuity of support for these children and young people. A very small number of children, who have been placed in hotels for asylum-seeking adults by the Home Office, have not been supported quickly enough to move on to other accommodation once it has been identified that they are children and not adults. Their needs have not been assessed or met and they have not been allocated social workers or PAs in a timely way. They have had very infrequent duty visits to ascertain their safety and left in unsuitable accommodation for too long.

Providing appropriate housing and accommodation to care-experienced young people in BCP Council remains problematic. Leaders have introduced systems to understand children and young people's housing needs and help children and young people find suitable accommodation. The quality of accommodation has improved, especially for those who live in shared accommodation. Despite these changes, there are still a small number of children and young people living in unsuitable housing that does not adequately meet their needs. Joint housing assessments are now taking place; however, the timeliness and quality of these assessments remain inconsistent. Responses from housing partners are not always timely and do not always prevent crisis for children and young people in terms of their accommodation.

Most children and young people have plans that include their views, needs and aspirations. Some stronger plans also provide encouraging words for children and young people to read. The impact of plans on achieving progress for them is not always evident. This is an area that team managers are beginning to focus on to ensure that all plans are meaningful and up to date and are making a difference.

Not all children and young people have health plans; some are not up to date. As a result, they will not be able to access important information in the future to help them make decisions about their health. Leaders have introduced a new system which is designed to help alleviate some of these issues going forward.

Not all children and young people are provided with specialist health help and support when they need it. For example, they are not able to access services quickly enough when their mental health deteriorates. This is mainly because of problems in gaining sufficient resources from health partners. Long waiting lists mean that not all those who need help are receiving it.

The care-experienced offer for children and young people is under review. Despite involvement from children and young people, the current offer is difficult to understand and navigate, both for young people and PAs. In its current form, some young people are disadvantaged as they would not be able to access some of the benefits. For example, they do not receive council tax relief if they live out of specific areas. Likewise, not all young people are able to afford driving lessons and without paying for some lessons themselves, they would not currently be able to access this part of their offer.

Leaders are working to use the staffing and the resources that they have to meet the increasing demands and needs placed on them in this part of the service. The current arrangements prevent PAs being allocated to children sufficiently early or in line with statutory guidance. This acts as a brake on how effectively children can be supported to prepare them for life as adults. Leaders are trying to balance this and are focused on not providing too much ongoing support beyond the age of 21. This is both to free up staffing and resources to provide support earlier to other children and to reduce support gradually to reduce the risk of a 'cliff edge' at age 25. However, for some young people support stops too abruptly and not always appropriately between the ages of 21 and 25.

Oversight and quality assurance systems are helping leaders to understand the quality of practice. Practice learning reviews (PLRs) are undertaken on a regular basis and these give leaders and managers some additional insight into the experiences of children and young people. However, learning from PLRs is not being used effectively to have had a timely impact on the quality of practice. There are some missed opportunities, such as always capturing the views of children, young people and partners, which may add richness and value to the reviews.

Caseloads are monitored by senior leaders and have reduced significantly since the last inspection. While this is positive and most PAs now have manageable caseloads, there are still some workers with higher caseloads and some PAs told inspectors that they do not feel that their workloads are always manageable.

The focus on recruitment and retention is making a positive difference and is a vital part of the local authority's continuing focus on improving the quality and consistency of services. There is now greater stability in staffing and the positive impact of this is just starting to be evident in practice. Staffing challenges, such as turnover and shortages, have meant that lots of children and young people have experienced too many changes in social workers and PAs, and for some young people this is unsettling and frustrating.

Leaders have provided managers with training and guidance about how to improve the quality of supervision. In more recent practice, the impact of this is starting to become evident. There is still some work to do to ensure that all children and young people have been discussed in supervision and that the quality of records is consistently to an appropriate standard.

PAs are supported to access training opportunities. However, there are some specific areas of practice in which some PAs do not currently have the knowledge and experience required for them to provide consistently effective support to children and young people. Managers are aware of this and are planning to improve the induction and training offer.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Tracey Ledder
His Majesty's Inspector