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160 Tooley Street
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Dear Mr Smith

Focused visit to Southwark local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Southwark local authority children's services on 13 and 14 December 2023. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Michelle Woodward and Christine Kennet.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for care leavers aged 18 to 25, focusing specifically on:

- Quality and suitability of accommodation.
- Support into adulthood.
- Care leavers with specific needs (for example, unaccompanied asylum seekers, young parents or those who have had contact with the criminal justice system).

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with personal advisers (PAs), experienced practitioners and managers. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

Headline findings

Since the last inspection in 2022, services to care leavers have continued to improve, with the needs of most care leavers being met well. Care leavers are well supported into early adulthood, and care leavers with specific or complex needs receive tailored provision. The specialist experienced practitioner roles located within the service provide invaluable support, advice and help to care leavers across a range of needs. Care leavers are involved in service development and their voices are heard. Not all care leavers have access to their health histories.

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

- Access to health histories.
- Ensuring that accommodation is well maintained.

Main findings

Care leavers receive high-quality support from skilled and committed PAs who know them well and provide practical advice and help when needed. PAs visit care leavers, including those who have children of their own, at a frequency that is consistent with their levels of need and risk, with patterns of contact increasing or decreasing as necessary as care leavers transition into adulthood. Visits are mostly focused and have a clear purpose. Records of visits are mostly well written, with subsequent actions identified. Staff are tenacious in maintaining contact with care leavers. The emphasis on building and sustaining relationships is a strength of the service.

Care leavers receive relevant and timely support from their PAs until they are aged 25, and sometimes beyond this point if necessary. An independence hub enables care leavers who are over 21 and have opted not to keep in regular contact to receive ongoing and well-defined assistance. When a care leaver needs more intensive support, they are reallocated to a PA in the care leaver teams. PAs in the hub complete a returning pathway plan to identify current risks and needs and the level of intervention required.

Pathway plans are mostly co-produced with care leavers in a timely manner. The plans are sensitively written; they include care leavers' views and consider all key areas of need, including accommodation and the development of life skills. Actions are agreed with care leavers, with clear advice and guidance as to how targets set in their plans may be met. A small minority of pathway plans are not updated when there is a change in care leavers' circumstances, including changes in accommodation, meaning that their current needs may not be fully assessed.

Care leavers' health and emotional needs are carefully considered and recorded in their pathway plans. Health histories are provided by the looked after children's nurse before care leavers reach adulthood. However, some care leavers reported that they have not received their health histories. This means that some care leavers do not have all the necessary information on which to base decisions for their future health needs as they move into adulthood. During the inspection, leaders submitted an action plan to ensure that the health summaries are redistributed to all young people by the end of February 2024.

Care leavers' emotional health needs are being met well through access to counselling from The Nest, a mental well-being service, and the clinical support team. Emotional health support through the clinical support team is not time-bound

and is driven by the needs of the care leavers. Care leavers resident outside of Southwark also have access to this service.

Most care leavers are in either education, employment or training, and those who are not are actively encouraged to take up such opportunities. Care leavers are supported well by the education and employment experienced practitioner, who has comprehensive knowledge of local colleges and post-16 education and employment pathways. This practitioner provides advice and guidance directly to individual care leavers, including those with more complex needs. When care leavers are not in education, employment or training, the additional involvement from this practitioner provides appropriate support to identify clear routes back into these activities.

Care leavers are actively encouraged into pursuing higher education, and many have successfully embarked on this route. They have access to relevant financial support and to suitable accommodation outside of term times.

PAs help care leavers to secure appropriate and suitable housing; care leavers are actively encouraged to secure permanent independent accommodation in Southwark, enabling them to remain close to the wider services for care leavers. Most care leavers are in accommodation which meets their needs. This includes 'staying put', semi-independent living and independent living. When care leavers are ready to move into independent accommodation, they receive appropriate financial assistance to help with the costs of moving and to furnish their accommodation. The local authority is flexible in supporting care leavers who are in financial difficulties.

Most care leavers report that they feel safe in their current housing, though some are concerned about the poor maintenance of their properties. Leaders are aware of this and have responded with a clear plan presented to the corporate parenting committee to address and quality assure the quality of semi-independent accommodation, including meeting and hearing directly from care leavers.

Care leavers in custody are visited frequently, and their PAs retain a focus on encouraging them to engage with education opportunities and skills development programmes to help prepare them for their release from custody. Pathway planning is effective in identifying the practical arrangements necessary to help care leavers to reintegrate into their communities.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers are well supported. Their health, education and cultural needs are understood by their PAs, including the impact of trauma. The provision of effective advocacy and legal advice helps to ensure that these care leavers are able to navigate successfully through the relevant processes to progress their asylum claims.

Disabled care leavers benefit from experienced and knowledgeable practitioners who know them well. Pathway plans clearly identify complex needs, including

communication, learning and social needs. Social work practitioners from the all-age disability service work well with PAs to ensure that disabled care leavers receive their entitlements when leaving care.

PAs mostly understand well the risks that the care leavers may face. They identify relevant protective factors and supportive service provision, based on their knowledge of individual care leavers. However, risk assessments are not always formally reviewed and updated within appropriate timescales, meaning that they are not consistently reflective of care leavers' current circumstances or any risks that they may be subject to.

Leaders show a strong commitment to participation and the inclusion of care leavers in developing local services, including accommodation and services designed to promote care leavers' life skills. There is a clear local offer, co-produced with care leavers, which identifies their rights and entitlements effectively. There are many opportunities to ensure that the voice of care leavers is heard, understood and acted upon. The corporate parenting committee is active and inclusive for care leavers, being arranged to ensure that care leavers can attend, fully participate in the meeting and be involved in developing services.

Staff have access to a wide range of training and development opportunities. They report that they are very well supported by proactive, visible managers, who encourage them to engage in personal development. These events enable them to reflect and focus on making improvements to their practice. Caseloads are manageable, enabling workers to undertake effective direct work with care leavers. Supervision is held regularly and, while there is some variability, most records are detailed and reflect the level of need and the care leavers' current circumstances.

The quality assurance framework in Southwark demonstrates a reflective, self-critical approach to continuous learning and development in work with care leavers. A regular programme of auditing the experiences of care leavers clearly informs leaders as to the impact of the work undertaken.

Senior leaders know their strengths and areas for improvement well and show a commitment to enhancing services further, such as increasing the number of apprenticeships available through the council and its partners.

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

Yours sincerely

Michelle Woodward
His Majesty's Inspector