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Risthardh Hare  
Executive Director of Children's Services  
Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council  
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Dear Risthardh

### **Monitoring visit to Sefton children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Sefton children's services on 13 and 14 February 2024. This was the fifth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in February 2022. His Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Lisa Summers and Rebecca Dubbins.

### **Areas covered by the visit**

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- The quality of help and support for care leavers.
- The effectiveness of transition planning and support for children into early adulthood.
- The quality of pathway planning for children and young people.
- The impact of support in meeting young people's needs, including the timeliness in accessing services to help their mental health and emotional well-being.
- The quality of help for young people with specific vulnerabilities, including those at risk of exploitation, young parents and 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. A range of evidence was considered during the visit, including electronic records, performance management information, case file audits

and other information provided by senior managers. In addition, inspectors spoke to a range of staff, including social workers and managers.

## **Headline findings**

Senior leaders have made steady progress in strengthening a number of areas of practice for care leavers, from a very low starting point. Strides have been taken to positively change the culture of the leaving care service. These changes have improved the attitude and approach, at both a strategic and operational level, to providing support for young people in Sefton. The development of policies and practice standards is helping personal advisers (PAs) to understand service expectations. Support for children entering early adulthood is more robust, and a refreshed offer to young people is better addressing the breadth of care leavers' needs. Nonetheless, senior leaders recognise there is more to do to improve the consistency of support for young people. This is especially the case for young people with specific vulnerabilities, such as young parents, those at risk of exploitation and those young people in custody.

Despite some improvements, the pace of progress in some areas of practice has been too slow. The number of young people who are not in employment, education or training remains high. There are still delays in young people accessing timely, lower-level emotional and mental health support. Young people who need adult social care services do not receive these soon enough, and there is insufficient choice of accommodation for young people.

More recently, there has been a positive step change at a strategic level. A new chief executive officer brings a clear understanding of the council's corporate responsibilities and a determination to meet these for children and young people. A new resolute and child-focused leader of the council is supporting this approach. A change in director of children's services, and two new interim assistant directors, has brought new ideas, a clarity of vision and greater ambition for Sefton's care leavers. As a result, there is more focus, and a drive towards a whole-council approach to improve outcomes for care leavers. Improvement plans have been refreshed, and there are a number of additional supports for young people due to commence imminently.

## **Findings and evaluation of progress**

Senior leaders have strengthened their investment and commitment to young people through a refreshed local offer for care leavers. This is now better matched to the broad range of needs of young people. Young people are routinely furnished with the key documents that they need to give them control over their lives, such as passports, National Insurance numbers and birth certificates. While young people are told about their rights and entitlements, this critical information is not revisited with them regularly enough to remind them of all the benefits of being a care leaver.

An increase in the number of PAs is enabling the local authority to extend the reach of the care leavers service. PAs are now allocated when children reach the age of 16. Despite this, high caseloads mean that there is not enough regular contact between children and advisers to establish this critical relationship at the earliest opportunity. This impacts on young people's ability to form enduring relationships which can help prepare them for adulthood.

The next steps panel is supporting more effective transition planning. At the last inspection, this development was in its infancy and the focus was too narrow. Work to strengthen the panel's function is providing greater oversight and senior management direction as young people move towards leaving care. Children's views, aspirations, current circumstances, education, and health needs are all considered and used to inform decision-making to progress transition planning.

There is more work to do to ensure that children are better prepared for adulthood at an earlier stage, and to understand children's individual independent living skills and how these can be developed. Pathway planning and reviews for children are not consistently well focused on what is needed to build children's confidence, or the skills that they need as they move to adulthood.

As young people turn 18, disabled young people and those with more complex needs continue to experience delays in accessing support. Assessments and help from adult social care are not provided soon enough for these young people. Lower-level emotional and mental health support is not timely enough. This prevents young people from having their needs met at the right time. Plans are currently being implemented to address this. However, it is too soon to see the impact on these young people.

The culture, attitude and approach to working with care leavers are all improving. Some PAs are now more ambitious and work hard to understand and support young people's needs. Most PAs show care and compassion in their approach, drawing young people towards them to provide support, rather than having an expectation that these young people will access services themselves. These young people are receiving help that is responsive to individual needs and changes in circumstances.

Most young people have regular contact with their PA, and this is helping to maintain relationships. However, the frequency of visiting is not consistently responsive to changes in young people's circumstances, nor their level of vulnerability. For a small number of young people, when they are reluctant to engage, PAs do not always consider creative ways to involve young people and are not tenacious enough in encouraging and maintaining contact.

The quality of contact between PAs and young people is inconsistent. Some young people benefit from purposeful visits with their advisers, where direct work is

undertaken. Other visits are too brief and do not test or progress the plan, nor explore how else young people can be supported.

The newly implemented pathway plan templates are bringing a greater understanding of the needs of young people leaving care. While plans completed by PAs are of better quality than those done by social workers, these still vary in quality. Plans are not always updated, especially the assessment to inform how young people's current needs will be met. Weaker plans are too broad and do not sufficiently detail specific actions or who will progress these. Clear timescales are not always defined to insert pace. This means that some young people experience support that is reactionary as opposed to planned and focused. Risks to young people are not routinely or sufficiently explored, including when young people are at risk of exploitation. This is limiting the coordination of work to manage potential harms and to mitigate risk. Better plans identify young people's strengths and how PAs will support them to develop the necessary skills to be successful adults. Young people's views are clearly captured and are well used to influence planning.

Planning does not capitalise on young people's networks to broaden the scope and duration of the support that they receive. There is an absence of systems to regularly review and bring coherence to planning to look at young people's current circumstances or to understand if progress is being made against the plan. This is a missed opportunity to routinely share information, maximise the benefits of multi-agency working, or challenge professionals if actions do not progress. As a result of partners' absence, the responsibility of enabling young people's plans rests with the already stretched PAs.

Senior leaders understand the impact of previous poor planning to help young people develop the necessary life skills to live independently. Appropriate actions have been taken by increasing the use and availability of supported living arrangements, and an expansion of carers who provide 'staying put' support. As a result, many care leavers are thriving. Young people are given priority to bid for local housing and most young people live in suitable accommodation. Despite this, senior leaders are aware that there is more to do to extend accommodation choices for young people to live in Sefton. This lack of available, good-quality homes is delaying some young people's ability to move into more appropriate housing at a time that is right for them.

There is insufficient pace and prioritisation to prepare and support young people into employment, education or training. Long-standing poor educational support that children had received while in care continues to hamper young people's readiness for work or training. This has left many young people without the skills, routines and experiences to enable them to transition smoothly into these new employment, training or work environments.

While the range of support to help care leavers to access and maintain work or training opportunities has expanded, it is not well coordinated. When young people

are willing to engage, they are helped to access a variety of training or work options. However, there is insufficient monitoring and focus on those young people who are less work- and training-ready. Planning often lacks ambition. It does not consider the barriers to engaging young people. Planning does not inform the steps needed to unlock young people's potential to enable them to achieve their aspirations. There is a limited number of apprenticeships, and the corporate strength of the council is not being exploited to increase these numbers through its partnerships. The out-of-work panel has been very recently established to provide scrutiny and direction to help young people progress into work, education or training. However, it is too soon to see the impact of this on young people.

The quality of support for a small, but highly vulnerable number of young people in custody is poor. Young people are not afforded sufficient contact and support by PAs, and visiting frequency is not in line with expected service standards. Some young people in custody have experienced multiple changes in PA, interrupting relationships. This is creating further barriers to engagement. There is no consideration of how to support young people in custody to maintain contact with those who are important to them. This leaves these young people alone, highly vulnerable and without the support that they need.

When young people are parents, or parents-to-be, pathway planning is not specific on the help and support that they need to be the best parents they can be. Work to develop parenting skills is inconsistent and multi-agency partnerships are not used to provide additional support. This includes when young people's babies are already receiving support as a child in need or in need of protection. This is leading to disjointed working.

Young people are encouraged to continue to receive ongoing support when they reach the age of 21. They are supported by PAs who are responsive to their needs and who assist them in accessing the help they need. Visits by PAs are undertaken at a frequency that is agreed with the young person but increases when needed. Consequently, young people benefit from positive relationships which enable them to talk openly to PAs about their struggles. This has improved since the last inspection.

The quality and impact of supervision remain a key area for improvement. Although supervision is mostly regular, and better demonstrates some level of reflection on practice, it is not consistently curious enough to help PAs truly understand young people's circumstances. Furthermore, supervision does not consider potential hypotheses of young people's situations to provide a clear direction to improve their circumstances. There is insufficient challenge to address shortfalls in practice, and actions are mostly process-focused. As a result, supervision is not driving planning or sufficiently impacting on the lives of young people.

Personal advisers enjoy working in Sefton and reflected how the service has improved since the last inspection. They report that managers have implemented

strategies to address the competing demands of their workload through regular 'stop the clock' days. Leaders have focused on upskilling advisers, and they have expanded the service, including through the use of agency workers. Senior managers recognise caseloads are too demanding for PAs to deliver effective and impactful work with children and young people. Plans are in place to increase further the number of PAs to support reduced workloads.

Senior leaders have a greater and more accurate understanding of the quality and impact of practice, following a recent detailed diagnostic of the care leavers service, and a more regular review of performance information. This is helping to further inform improvement planning. Although these plans are progressing, it is too soon to see the wider impact for young people.

The quality of audits is improving. The implementation of a tailored audit tool is helping to provide a more informed understanding of the quality and impact of work. Most audits now identify strengths and areas for improvement. Auditors are persistent in gaining feedback from young people and this is providing a clear insight into their relationships with their PA. Moderators appropriately adjust judgements against core elements of practice, and bring professional challenge, in-depth reflection and a sharper focus on young people's experiences. Despite this, these observations do not always translate into appropriate actions, and too many recommendations continue to focus on process rather than what needs to happen to improve young people's circumstances.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Lisa Summers  
**His Majesty's Inspector**