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Dear Joanne Siddle

Focused visit to Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Blackburn with Darwen children's services on 23 and 24 April 2024. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Rebecca Dubbins and Andy Waugh.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for care leavers aged 18 to 25 with a particular focus on:

- the quality of planning for care leavers over the age of 18 years.
- the identification and provision of support for care leavers, to include their health and education needs, and to obtain accommodation appropriate to their needs.
- the offer available for care leavers and their knowledge of this.
- the quality of management oversight and supervision.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. This visit was carried out entirely on site. Inspectors considered a broad range of evidence, including care leavers' individual records, and undertook case discussions with personal advisors, social workers and managers. Inspectors also spoke to care leavers. Inspectors reviewed relevant local authority performance and quality assurance information.

Headline findings

Since the last inspection, when the overall effectiveness of the service was judged to be requires improvement to be good, there has been effective and focused action by senior leaders, elected members and partners to improve services for care leavers.

Leaders have invested appropriately in the care leavers' service to improve the care leaver offer and to ensure sufficient capacity in the workforce. Systems and

processes have been established to enable leaders to fully understand the experiences of young people leaving care and to be clear about the quality of practice undertaken. External scrutiny, challenge and meaningful consultation with care leavers have been actively sought and responded to effectively by senior leaders. As a result, leaders know themselves well, including their strengths and areas for development, and care leavers are well supported to achieve their best outcomes.

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

- Up-to-date pathway plans to be completed in a timeframe which reflects the circumstances of the young person.
- The clarity of information in the care leaver offer so that every care leaver is aware of their entitlements.
- Care leavers to be visited according to their needs and this frequency to be set out in their pathway plans.

Main findings

Care leavers preparing for adulthood benefit from personal advisors, who routinely start working with them before they prepare to leave care. This enables them to develop longstanding and trusting relationships with their personal advisors.

Care Leavers benefit from pathway plans that are mostly purposeful and detailed, and they routinely include the input of other agencies. Pathway plans are mostly completed alongside care leavers. They reflect their needs well and they outline the support required. As a result, care leavers can clearly see what support is available to help them to achieve their goals. Sometimes, pathway plans are not consistently updated to reflect the care leaver's circumstances or when there are significant changes in their lives.

The virtual college, led by the virtual school headteacher, oversees the circumstances of all care leavers to ensure that opportunities for education employment and training are available and progressed. Workers in the local authority's new directions service provide practical support to help care leavers to access work or education. When care leavers are not ready for work or education, due to health or disability needs, effective links are developed with partners in the health service to successfully support them. Personal advisors are ambitious in supporting young people to achieve their aspirations. As a result, more care leavers have been supported to access education, employment and training. Care leavers spoke positively about the support their personal advisor provided to them.

Care leavers are helped by workers, who advocate strongly for them. This is evidenced on their records and care leavers stated that they appreciated this level of support from their personal advisors.

Personal advisors support care leavers to maintain relationships with their families, where appropriate, as well as helping them to develop wider support networks. They are persistent in ensuring care leavers' well-being and safety at times of crisis and are there to provide support when they need it. However, some care leavers are not aware of who to contact out of hours and would benefit from this being made more explicit. This is to ensure that care leavers understand the continuum of support available to them.

Care leavers are visited regularly by their personal advisors, who increase their visiting frequency, when needs and risks escalate. Nonetheless, the rationale for this frequency is not always set out in their pathway plans. This can mean that care leavers are not clear when their personal advisor will visit and why. Visits to care leavers are carefully recorded. Personal advisors take the time to have meaningful, and sometimes difficult discussions with care leavers about their needs and potential risks. These discussions inform pathway plans, the support needed and the next steps, capturing care leaver's views throughout. This ensures that care leavers can share their experiences and are assisted in pursuing their wishes.

Most care leavers are living in suitable and safe accommodation. They receive the right level of support to enable them to develop their independence skills. Effective planning takes place to minimise the amount of disruption that young people experience when they reach the age of 18, or when they need to move between placements. When accommodation issues arise, practitioners address these with tenacity, working with partners well to ensure that these issues are resolved. As a result, moves are planned well, minimising any disruption to care leavers.

Care leavers mostly know their rights and the services to which they are entitled. Pathway plans and case records provide evidence that these have been shared with care leavers and they are aware of the support they are able to access. Care Leavers are routinely provided with all the key documents that they need to begin their lives as young adults. For those going to university, appropriate financial support is available. There are some basic provisions sometimes provided but not outlined in the care leavers' offer, such as council tax exemption and ring-fenced apprentice opportunities. Senior leaders state that these need to be more clearly set out and are addressing this deficit.

All care leavers at the age of 18 now receive a health summary letter. These letters are co-produced with care leavers, who can add to them. This provides them with an understanding of their health histories. Care leavers have access to health professionals from specialist teams that are effective. The specialist nursing team provides consultation to personal advisors and will advocate on care leavers' behalf with their general practitioners, promoting trauma-informed practice. Another specialist health service provides support for young people up to the age of 25 with emotional health needs. When this is required, specialist workers become part of the care leaver's professional network to ensure that a multi-agency plan is in place. This

means that care leavers have support from professionals with the right expertise as part of the team around them.

Care leavers' right to complain is routinely explored with them by their personal advisors, who also provide advice and support when accessing their care records. There is a clear offer of ongoing support for care leavers who reach the age of 21. Ongoing support is assumed until the age of 25. However, this is discussed with care leavers and their views are sought. If a care leaver wishes to have no ongoing support from the service, an assessment of need will be undertaken. This ensures that those care leavers who are vulnerable, or considered to be at risk, continue to receive a service.

Team managers and senior leaders have a strong oversight of the most vulnerable care leavers in the service. Regular meetings are held with partner agencies, when needed. This is to ensure that any risks to young people can be addressed and mitigated.

Personal advisors are supervised regularly by their team managers. Supervision records are reflective and cover pertinent issues, individualised according to care leavers' needs and strengths. Team managers effectively monitor the progress of young people's plans.

Senior leaders have a secure insight into the strengths and areas for development in the leaving care service. A well-set-out quality assurance framework provides leaders and managers with an accurate overview of the quality of practice. Managers at all levels place an emphasis on the need for relationship-based practice. There is clear evidence of this in practice, in care leavers' records and when speaking to care leavers and staff.

Learning from audits is shared at team and service level, helping to improve practice. However, outcomes from audits are not always capturing all the required actions to improve practice and impact for the young person.

All practitioners spoke positively about the support they receive from their managers. This has helped workers to deliver the improvements required. The workforce and senior leadership team are committed to getting services right for care leavers. They have made a tangible difference to the experiences of care leavers.

Yours sincerely

Rebecca Dubbins
His Majesty's Inspector