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Dear Ms James

Focused visit to Gloucestershire County Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Gloucestershire County Council children's services on 22 and 23 January 2025. His Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Alison Smale and John Roughton.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for older children in care and care leavers under 21.

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

Headline findings

Strong corporate and political support has led to an impressive level of dedication and ambition for care leavers in Gloucestershire, which has significantly improved the experiences of many care leavers. A restructure of the service has been implemented so that it better serves care leavers and older children in care. A relationship-based systemic model of practice and enhancements to the care leaver offer have all had a positive impact for older children in care and care leavers. Co-production with young people has been fully embedded. This reflects the value leaders and those who work for the local authority place on young people and how they empower them to help design services and improve the service.

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

- The records of senior management oversight and decision-making on children and young people's files.
- Joint planning and contingency arrangements for children placed on remand.

Main findings

Older children who are still in care benefit from early consideration with their social workers and independent reviewing officers to explore options for leaving care, so that it is well planned. Statutory reviews are well written to children, in a way that is informative and makes it clear what decisions are being made and why. Staying put is considered and explored for older children living in foster care. For these children, staying put has a positive impact on their life, which provides them with a secure base to take their first steps into adulthood.

Children in care now benefit from earlier allocation of a personal adviser (PA) which means they know their PA well by the time they leave care. Co-work between the social worker and PA is based on guidance about roles.

Care leavers build effective, supportive and trusting relationships with their PA in preparation for adulthood. For most care leavers, the frequency of visits is tailored to their needs. PAs are determined and creative to ensure their relationships with care leavers are maintained. Their ability to be reflective about the role they play to support individual care leavers enables many to make progress towards independence. The ambitious ethos for work with care leavers means that for some young people, intervention has been transformative in turning their lives around or opening up new opportunities for their futures.

A range of opportunities are available to support care leavers to develop their independence skills within the care leaver service. Many care leavers take up structured learning programmes which recognise and build on their abilities to develop their independence skills and achieve the 'gold standard' certification before they gain their own permanent social housing.

Most care leavers have access to supported accommodation and independent living accommodation beyond 18, in preparation for their own tenancies and to support their transition to independence when this is appropriate to their needs. Leaders have done and are doing more to improve the sufficiency of local supported and independent living accommodation, with additional provision being commissioned and built. Most care leavers who live at a distance from Gloucestershire are positively choosing this. They are visited regularly and are well supported by their PAs to access resources in their respective localities. When they decide they want to return to Gloucestershire, this is enabled, and they are well supported to achieve this.

For the very small number of older children over 16 who are placed in unregistered placements, the quality of support and oversight varies. Although social workers and managers say there is frequent oversight by senior managers, it is not sufficiently evident on children's records. More generally, the use of panels and senior management oversight when placement decisions are made is not sufficiently evident in children's records. Leaders acknowledged this to inspectors during this

visit and agreed to review the recording of panel arrangements to ensure that children's records accurately reflect key decisions and oversight by managers.

A very small number of care leavers are living in hotel accommodation temporarily while appropriate accommodation is found. When care leavers are living in unsuitable accommodation, PAs work tenaciously with them and housing colleagues to ensure they are safe and appropriate accommodation is identified. Risk assessments are undertaken routinely to inform planning, which helps to ensure needs are well understood and risks reduced.

Care leavers are encouraged to maintain or renew relationships with family members and supported when they want to do this. Life-story tools enable workers to work with young people to help them understand their life story.

It is positive that care leavers and older children in care are supported by their PAs to be open and informed about sexual health and relationships. Physical health needs are identified, and young people can access the support they need, for example from dentists and opticians.

When young people have emotional well-being needs, they receive helpful advice and guidance to access services. Some older children in care benefit from child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) support which is embedded in the youth support team. A very small number of young people who have more complex emotional or mental health needs do not receive support soon enough, and this can impact negatively on other areas of their lives such as housing and education. Leaders have addressed this with the Integrated Commissioning Board (ICB) and have achieved some success, which has resulted in a reduced waiting list for CAMHS. They recognise the need for continued improvement for this group of children and young people to be able to access mental health services.

The local offer for care leavers has been actively enhanced and reviewed with young people so that it reflects their wishes and needs. The offer is well understood and promoted by PAs who ensure that care leavers have access to their entitlements. Additional support mitigates some pressures being experienced by care leavers as a result of higher living costs. It supports them to travel and have the resources they need to learn and work and supports them to engage in sports and leisure activities.

The virtual school provides significant support for care leavers, which adds focus to the development of options and the provision of education, training and employment opportunities for care leavers.

Most pathway plans are written with care leavers, using positive language that cares. This reflects the guidance co-produced with care-experienced 'ambassadors'. Some pathway plans do not sufficiently reference partnership working when other agencies are involved. Most are up to date, however, a minority of pathway plans are not

reviewed and updated within timescales, or refreshed after a significant event has occurred which has changed the young person's circumstances.

When care leavers are in custody, PAs maintain contact with them through visits, phone calls and by writing to them. Financial support is provided through postal orders. When children are placed on remand, joint planning with probation and prison staff does not routinely consider contingency arrangements or inform sentencing. This means that this small cohort of young people may not be clear about what may happen to them next, depending on the outcome in court.

Care leavers and children in care who are parents are well supported. Specific initiatives have been established to support these young people, through the corporate grandparent offer. Pathway plans include a specific area to record parenting needs and actions. Needs are further explored through a risk and vulnerability matrix which supports more dynamic decision-making to identify whether a referral to a social worker is required for the baby. A valued dedicated parent support group for care-experienced young people with children meets regularly, facilitated by a care-experienced peer mentor.

Care leavers who entered care as unaccompanied children seeking asylum are supported well by their PAs. Joint transition planning between social workers and PAs in preparation for adulthood is timely and very effective. Many young people seeking asylum are now receiving their leave to remain decision quickly, which enables them to achieve permanency and access employment. Care leavers are supported to maintain links or find their families in their countries of origin, when this is safe. A specialist commissioned service is used when concerns are identified about child exploitation and trafficking.

An English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) group has been set up by social workers in the children in care and care leaver services. This is a positive child-centred initiative, established from the ground up and supported by senior leaders. As well as giving young people the opportunity to develop their English language skills, either during holidays or until they are enrolled on a course, it has enabled those young people to develop trusting relationships with the social workers, who they see on a very regular basis.

Strong leadership is delivering an impressive vision through the 'Ambitions' improvement plan, in collaboration with care-experienced young people. The local authority's self-evaluation provides an accurate overview of practice. This is based on comprehensive performance information, the quality assurance framework and feedback from those who use the service. Clear links are evident between practice standards, supervision and training. The lead member presents a report at every full council meeting which has led to several new commitments to care leavers and reflects the priority given to care-experienced young people.

The corporate parenting strategy 'The sky's the limit' immediately highlights an aspirational approach. It is very child-focused, written for children in a very accessible way. Ambassadors set out the pledge based on 'what we need' and what councillors will do to meet these needs. The voice of children is explicit throughout.

The value given to hearing and taking notice of the voice of young people is strong and impressive. Young people are highly respected and influence changes and improvements, which means they are central to and embedded in the local authority's improvement journey. Ambassadors are involved in decision-making strategically and at every level as paid employees. An ambassador co-chairs the Ambitions improvement board and they are represented on the corporate parenting board. Ambassadors mentor senior leaders, which keeps them grounded and in touch with the experiences of older children in care and care leavers. In addition to the ambassadors, leaders have maximised other ways to hear from all young people, such as the Bright Spots survey and use of a specialist app, as well as various groups and forums.

The local authority's social work academy has been expanded to include learning for non-social work qualified staff. PAs in the care leaver service benefit from bespoke training. The revised structure of the care leaver service includes an advanced practitioner (AP), senior PA and specialist roles, resulting in career development opportunities which have strengthened practice and the experience of care leavers.

Staff like working in Gloucestershire and are proud of what they achieve for their children and care leavers. They feel well supported by their teams and managers. Generally, they benefit from regular supervision and management oversight of their work but there is some variance in quality and frequency. They have manageable caseloads. Senior managers are visible, and many are known to staff. Staff are positive about the changes implemented by leaders for care leavers, particularly the enhancements to the local offer to care leavers and the creation of a dedicated care leaver service.

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

Yours sincerely

Alison Smale
His Majesty's Inspector