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Dear Ashley

Focused visit to Isle of Wight children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Isle of Wight children's services on 24 and 25 February 2026. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Shabana Warne and Joy Howick.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for care leavers, focusing on the quality and suitability of accommodation, support into adulthood and support for disabled care leavers.

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

Headline findings

Since the previous inspection in 2023, when the support provided to care leavers was judged to be good, leaders and managers have worked relentlessly to maintain those standards and to address the areas identified for improvement.

A newly improved and revised young people-friendly local offer now provides a wide range of practical and advisory services for care leavers. Support for disabled care leavers and former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is a clear strength, with tenacious, well-coordinated multi-agency work making a positive difference for these young people.

Care leavers are well supported by a dedicated and stable workforce. Personal Advisers (PAs) build strong relationships with care leavers and are creative in their approach to support them. Pathway plans are well written and typically reflect young people's voices well. Most care leavers live in stable and suitable accommodation and leaders acknowledge that any care leaver living in an unsuitable accommodation is not acceptable. A small, but significant, number of young people are living in unsuitable and unsafe accommodation, with some reporting poor conditions, loneliness and repeated cycles of homelessness. Significant work is still needed to

strengthen the quality and availability of suitable accommodation and to increase care leavers' participation and influence. While leaders prioritise hearing young people's voices, there is a disconnect between planned work, delivered support and how some young people experience services.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?[1]

- The quality and suitability of accommodation for care leavers. (outcome 4, national framework)
- How well care leavers are consulted with, and their views contribute to and influence service development and practice improvement. (enabler 2, national framework)

Main findings

PAs are allocated to young people well before their 18th birthday, providing the opportunity for PAs to build trusting relationships with many young people. Most care leavers are well supported with pathway plans that are celebratory of young people's achievements and reflect their strengths and aspirations. Visits to care leavers are regular and take place at home or in the community, in line with young people's preferences and needs. Most pathway plans contain appropriate actions to support young people to access education, training and employment and some benefit from these supports and go on to achieve their goals. PAs support young people to make effective use of appropriate mental health services from a range of agencies, including through funded specialist therapeutic support when needed. The local offer for care leavers has been improved and is now ambitious, accessible and provides a wide range of support, including financial help. Pathway plans make good use of the broad variety of supports and services available to care leavers to help meet their needs.

Inspectors met with a small group of care leavers, who spoke in an articulate and impressive manner about their experiences of being a care leaver and what changes they want to see in the support provided to them. Some young people in the group shared that they did not understand the role of PAs during the transition period and that not all PAs get to know them or their care history well enough before they turn 18, leading them to repeat their stories multiple times. This group of care leavers want improved communication between social workers and PAs to support a smoother transition into adulthood. Young people also expressed a wish for PAs to have more time to contact them proactively, rather than relying solely on six-weekly check-ins.

[1] The areas for improvement have been cross-referenced with the outcomes, enablers or principles in the Children's Social Care: National Framework. This statutory guidance sets out the purpose, principles for practice and expected outcomes of children's social care.

Former unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers are well supported through a specialist commissioned service, alongside a dedicated PA with expertise in this area. Despite significant legal, housing and discrimination-related challenges, PAs work with determination, sensitivity and resilience in meeting these young people's needs.

Support for disabled care leavers is a particular strength and most disabled care leavers receive a responsive service that offers them strong support into adulthood. PAs work closely with a wide range of professionals and demonstrate tenacity, carefully considered planning and sustained commitment. Assessments are of high quality and clearly reflect young people's aspirations. PAs gather their wishes and feelings by using their preferred individual communication methods and their voices therefore inform their plans well. Disabled care leavers are well supported during transition periods with effective multi-agency support remaining in place while their support is transferred to adult social care. Records for disabled care leavers are consistently strong, providing a clear and compassionate narrative of significant life events and future plans. These records help young people to understand their history and develop a sense of identity and direction for future.

While most care leavers benefit from living in suitable housing, including supported accommodation and independent living, a small number of care leavers, including some with complex needs, live in unsuitable accommodation where their needs are not adequately met and some have been exposed to harm. Inspectors heard from some care leavers about their experiences of poor housing conditions and a cycle of homelessness, difficulties in securing a flat, and struggling in isolation. Many talked about limited access to employment opportunities and said that they felt trapped in poverty, which affected their confidence and ability to engage socially. Some young people said poor accommodation had become normalised and expressed frustration at the prolonged lack of suitable housing, with some spending years waiting for a stable and decent home.

Political and corporate leaders acknowledge the severity and urgency of the housing situation for care leavers and are aware of the impact this is having for these care leavers' wellbeing, safety and life opportunities. The council's sufficiency strategy rightly identifies the continued lack of sufficient housing provision for care leavers and makes a clear statement that that no care leaver will be living in bed and breakfast accommodation. While various housing projects and initiatives are in progress, including the parenting and participation (corporate parenting) boards' 'Start and Grow' project, which helps prepare care leavers to move into safe and permanent accommodation, their impact is limited at present because too many care leavers remain living in unsuitable homes and insufficient progress has been made to address this.

Most care leavers over 21 years old receive continuing and consistent practical and emotional support from their PAs until they are 25 years old. Young people are aware that if they choose to end their support from the leaving care service, they can reengage if they need it. The decisions to step down from the service is based

on their ongoing level of need. Care leavers who opt out of the service are able to access support should they require it, and, in some cases, care leavers who asked for support and received it were over 25. The frequency and intensity of support increase when young people experience heightened needs or periods of crisis.

Care leavers increasingly benefit from a revised and ambitious local offer. The offer is backed by cross-party support and enhanced financial investment to help ensure its effective delivery. Having adopted 'Care Experienced' as a protective characteristic, the council is committed to implementing the offer and supporting care leavers with the best opportunities. Listening to young people is clearly a priority for the local authority's leaders. Inspectors saw effective collaborative pathway plans and the beginnings of a participation offer through which a small number of young people have been involved in shaping some policies and programmes. However, the participation offer is in its infancy and there are limited opportunities for care leavers to shape service development and positively contribute to improving practice. Care leavers told inspectors that they are willing to provide mentoring support to young people transitioning into adulthood and contribute to developing practice. They said that they want to have more organised forums to share their experiences that can help improve the outcomes for current and future care leavers. Leaders recognise the need to strengthen mechanisms to ensure that young people are consistently involved in service planning and delivery.

While a new quality assurance framework is in place, it is not currently providing leaders and managers sufficient insight into practice quality for care leavers. Current performance and audit data are not being used effectively in order to provide learning about the quality and impact of practice that can inform service development. Leaders recognise that audit activity is not being used to best effect in the care leavers service and have plans in place to address this.

The workforce in the leaving care service is stable, and PAs say that they feel well supported. Visits to care leavers outside of the island can add to the pressures and challenges of workload management for a small number of workers. PAs receive regular supervision, along with ad-hoc guidance when required. However, supervision records are largely descriptive and lack reflective analysis or consistent tracking of agreed actions. This limits managers' ability to assure themselves that plans are progressing effectively. PAs spoke positively about supportive colleagues and managers who are accessible and helpful.

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

Yours sincerely

Shabana Warne
His Majesty's Inspector