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Dear Zoe

Monitoring visit to Halton children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Halton children's services on 29 and 30 April 2026. This was the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in May 2024. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Lisa Walsh and Gemma McNevin.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made for care leavers in relation to the following areas:

- pathway planning
- employment, education and training
- support into adulthood, including for vulnerable groups
- health and emotional wellbeing

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. A range of evidence was considered, including electronic records, performance management information, case file audits, and other information provided by senior managers. In addition, inspectors spoke to care leavers and personal advisers (PAs) and social workers.

Headline findings

Since the ILACS inspection in May 2024, the local authority has made strong progress in strengthening its offer to care leavers. External reviews have helped leaders target improvement effectively, supported by a more stable, largely permanent workforce and visible, engaged senior leaders. Investment in new roles, including outreach workers and a '21 year plus' worker, is starting to improve outcomes for young people. Leaders have prioritised co-production with young people. This is where young people work alongside practitioners to shape decisions

and services, resulting in a more coordinated service. However, practice remains inconsistent, particularly in pathway planning, education, employment and training outcomes, and the quality of supervision and management oversight. Leaders recognise these shortfalls and have firm plans in place to address them.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Social workers and PAs know young people well. Most young people are allocated a PA at a time that enables them to build relationships with them before they leave care. This early allocation supports PAs to understand young people's histories, which is particularly important for those with complex needs. Once young people transfer into the care leaver service, keeping-in-touch arrangements are responsive to individual needs. Visits are purposeful and help to support improvements in young people's lives.

The quality of pathway plans is too variable. Some plans are written directly to young people, clearly reflect their voice and consider the practical aspects of their lives. In other examples, plans do not take account of young people's holistic needs or the impact of their past experiences on future decisions. Contingency planning is inconsistent and often based on current circumstances rather than anticipating what might be needed to build resilience and support young people into adulthood.

When young people are not engaging with the service, PAs and managers are tenacious in their attempts to maintain contact. When young people go missing, risks are now more clearly understood and recorded, and staff make ongoing attempts to locate them.

Supporting young people into education, employment and training continues to be a significant challenge. Although several initiatives have been introduced and there is a stronger focus on re-engagement, this work is not fully embedded and has not led to a sustained increase in the number of young people accessing suitable opportunities.

PAs support care leavers to ensure their health needs are prioritised and met. Young people are helped to access both universal and specialist health services. However, records do not clearly indicate whether young people routinely access their health histories, limiting opportunities for them to understand their own health needs as they move into adulthood.

Most care leavers live in safe, stable and suitable homes, including supported accommodation and tenancies and placements with former foster carers. When accommodation is not meeting their needs, young people are actively supported to find alternatives. Young people receive practical and emotional support to develop the skills they need to live independently.

For care leavers with disabilities, some plans are too focused on their complex needs rather than their abilities. Referrals to adult services are not always timely, meaning some young people do not receive the support they need when they need it.

Leaders have listened closely to the voices of young people, and this has shaped the direction of improvement since the last inspection. Co-production has led to the development of the care leavers' app and the introduction of new outreach workers, strengthening support for young people. The enhanced care leaver offer, alongside the Youth Guarantee trailblazer, is enabling a more tailored response to local need. Specialist hubs and drop-ins are giving young people additional opportunities to access support in ways that feel accessible to them.

Most young people report positive relationships with their PAs and feel supported and heard. However, some describe variable experiences that have affected their trust in the system. Most young people receive their entitlements, but some are still not aware of the local offer and rely on their PAs to explain it.

Support for young people in custody is varied. Where practice is strong, there is clear management oversight, risks are well understood, and planning is purposeful. However, for other young people, needs are not consistently identified or fully understood, which limits opportunities to ensure support is effective.

Care leaver parents receive a supportive service. PAs build strong relationships and advocate effectively for young people within multi-agency planning for their children.

Separated migrant care leavers benefit from close, trusting relationships with PAs. They are supported to build stability, live near their communities and access education, language courses, apprenticeships and employment. Their ambitions are clearly reflected in pathway plans, visits and supervision.

Support for care leavers aged over 21 years is inconsistent. Some young people who continue to be allocated to the same PA beyond their 21st birthday report that they do not receive the level of help they feel they need. In contrast, those who are allocated to the dedicated '21 year plus' worker experience more consistent, responsive support that is tailored to their individual needs.

Quality assurance processes, including audits and external reviews, are effective and demonstrate a strong commitment to reflection. Audits now provide a clear line of sight into care leavers experiences, with managers demonstrating a strong understanding of what good practice looks like. Leaders recognise that the quality of management oversight and supervision is inconsistent. While PAs receive regular supervision, there is not a consistent approach to the quality of supervision across the service.

Caseloads for PAs remain high, and some staff experience this as unmanageable. Despite this, PAs and social workers speak positively about the support they receive from senior managers and team managers and feel able to access help when needed.

Yours sincerely

Lisa Walsh
His Majesty's Inspector