

22 August 2024

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Dear John

Monitoring visit to Peterborough children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Peterborough City Council children's services on 30 and 31 July 2024. This was the first monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in November 2023. His Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Russel Breyer and Rebecca Dubbins.

Areas covered by the visit

This monitoring visit focused on the experience and progress of care leavers aged 18-25, in particular the support, advice and guidance given to those with additional vulnerabilities, such as those who are insecurely housed, not in education, employment or training, or have involvement with criminal justice.

This visit was carried out in line with the Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) framework.

Headline findings

Since the inspection of children's services in November 2023, which found the experiences and progress of care leavers to be inadequate, senior leaders have resolutely increased their focus on delivering improvements so that care leavers have better outcomes. They have done this against a backdrop of considerable financial challenge and a change in political leadership. Leaders have invited external scrutiny and have worked alongside staff and care leavers to refocus the service.

Financial resources have been committed to add much-needed capacity into the service and to develop supportive resources. Management capacity in the care leaving service is being increased and six new personal adviser (PA) posts are being recruited to. One of the new PAs has already started work and the impact of this additional post can be seen in the service offered to the young people she is supporting. The local offer has been improved, with significant input from care

leavers. Progress is being made in developing resources such as the House project, which will provide a base for care leavers to access services.

Early signs of improvement are being seen as a result of this activity and young people are beginning to benefit. One particular area of progress is improved persistence by PAs in reaching out to young people who are harder to engage, and encouraging them to accept help. Some young people are responding well to this approach, and their situations are improving. However, while many of the service plans for improvement are progressing, they are not yet all operational or do not yet have impact for young people.

While some young people receive good support and make progress, this is not consistent for all young people. Too many are not receiving enough help to achieve their potential. Leaders need to ensure that rapid progress is made in key areas that still need to be improved, such as the quality of pathway planning and the supervision of staff. Other areas, such as ensuring sufficient staffing capacity and developing helpful resources that PAs can call on to support young people, must be supported in the longer term to ensure that improvements are sustained. This will require the commitment of leaders in all parts of the system, such as housing and corporate services, as well as partner agencies.

Findings and evaluation of progress

The local authority's self-evaluation of the care leavers service is accurate, underpinned by effective auditing and quality assurance arrangements which in turn support improvements in practice and the development of services. Young people are consulted in most audits, however, their voice does not read strongly in the audit document, and the impact of audits would be further strengthened by increasing the breadth and visibility of young people's feedback. Routinely consulting with partners would also further strengthen the impact of audits.

PAs are strongly committed to their young people and speak warmly of them, taking pride in their achievements. Practice is relationship based, and these relationships are carefully developed at each young person's pace to build trust, so that they will accept help. Young people who spoke to inspectors gave positive feedback about their PAs, who they find responsive, caring and helpful. There have been significant improvements in persistently reaching out to young people who are harder to engage. Inspectors saw examples of this making a tangible and important difference to vulnerable care leavers.

High caseloads persist in this service, which limit the time PAs can spend with young people. This means that PAs are sometimes unable to increase the frequency of visits to young people at times of higher need. Leaders have recognised this and recruitment is in hand to increase staffing capacity. PAs report that simpler systems and clear protocols and procedures between council departments would reduce the

time spent on bureaucracy, or in overcoming obstacles, and would increase the time they can spend with young people.

The local offer to care leavers who have reached 21 and who may still need support has improved. More young people are now given clearer information about their rights and are supported to make a choice. Examples were seen of young people who need an allocated PA beyond the age of 21 receiving this service. Those who do not need an allocated PA but would benefit from contacting a PA at times of need, are given better advice, and contact details. However, the offer is not clear enough in the new local offer document, so that young people can easily understand their entitlement. Supervision does not consistently support PAs to address this with young people.

Leaders have made a commitment to allocate a PA to children in care shortly after their 16th birthday, although support is not yet consistent for all. Some of those aged 16 or 17 have been visited by their PAs, although many have not, even when a PA has been allocated to them. Weaknesses in supervision and management oversight mean that some young people are not effectively prioritised for this support. Some with higher needs are not yet getting the opportunity to develop a relationship with their PA in readiness for the support they are likely to need when they leave care.

The local offer overall is much improved, offering a wider range of assistance that care leavers need as they enter adulthood. Some tangible benefits, such as council tax exemption, are already in place, although systems for accessing this are not easily navigated. The local offer has only recently been published, so most benefits are not yet known to, or reaching, young people. Some areas of the new local offer lack clarity or sufficient detail to be meaningful to young people, such as the offer to support them into employment, and the offer to those aged 21 and over. Care leavers said a version of the local offer that is accessible on a smartphone would be helpful.

The quality of most supervision is not good enough to support workers in thinking through approaches or in setting specific actions to help young people. Due to management churn in the service, there have been gaps in supervision. Most workers have had a number of changes of supervisor, which limits the consistency of oversight, and some supervision records are very brief, with no meaningful guidance, support or accountability. Young people's progress is impacted by this.

Pathway plans for some care leavers are relevant to need and updated as needs change and objectives are achieved. Too many plans are not specific about the help that will be given. In many of these cases, actions are set for the young person which are not likely to be achieved.

PAs understand the challenges former separated migrant young people may face, and they provide suitable emotional and practical support. PAs offer sensitive support

to care leavers who are parents, including those whose children are receiving services from children's social care. Care leavers in custody are visited regularly or spoken to via video link. PAs are proactive in alerting other professionals when issues arise for young people in custody. Planning for young people's release is considered early and there is a strong emphasis on liaising with probation, housing providers and family networks.

When there are concerns about exploitation of care leavers, risk is assessed to provide a clear understanding of the concerns, and PAs respond to these effectively. Some PAs are uncertain about the type of support the exploitation team (Empower) can offer. The local authority is in the process of ensuring this is better understood across all services. This means that all care leavers, regardless of their age, can be given timely support to access coordinated services that meet their needs.

Care leavers in further and higher education are supported to maintain education placements and are assisted with bursaries and finance towards accommodation. Examples were seen of care leavers with high needs making good progress. However, services to support young people into employment are underdeveloped, with a lack of opportunities for internships and apprenticeships, or of employers being supported to offer opportunities. Leaders are planning to develop this area, including identifying opportunities within the council and increasing the capacity of the virtual school, but these plans are at an early stage and not yet having impact. The support that will be available is not specified in sufficient detail in the local offer.

The care leavers service has a homelessness prevention officer who is persistent in her support to PAs and care leavers. Work to develop joint housing protocols is under way. But specific improvements, and dates for achieving these, are not set out in the service's self-evaluation or action plan. Inspectors saw examples of care leavers insecurely housed, in one case being evicted without the care leaving service being informed, and then encountering obstacles in the housing service to securing even temporary accommodation. This has resulted in periods of being street homeless for at least one young person, and periods in bed and breakfast accommodation.

Care leavers are engaged well in developing services through the corporate parenting committee and other activities, and are proud of their contribution. There are active plans to further develop these arrangements. The committee would be strengthened in driving improvements for young people by increased involvement from partner agencies.

The improvement partners who are currently working with Peterborough City Council Children's Services said they believe that leaders have the right plans in place, and are doing the right things at the right time to improve services for care leavers in Peterborough. We look forward to seeing outcomes further improve for care leavers.

Because this is the first monitoring visit to your local authority, we will not publish this letter on our website. You may share this letter with others if you wish. I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Russel Breyer
His Majesty's Inspector

Pre-publication

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