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Dear Ms Butler

Focused visit to West Sussex local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to West Sussex local authority children's services on 24 and 25 July 2024. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Brenda McLaughlin and Steve Bailey.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for care leavers aged 18 to 25 years old, including support into adulthood, 'staying close' and in touch, and care leavers with specific needs.

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

Headline findings

Services for care leavers in West Sussex have substantially improved since the ILACS inspection in 2023. Senior leaders have facilitated a range of improvements that are supporting care leavers to make the transition to adulthood safely and at their own pace. Most pathway plans strongly reflect the voice of the young person and sensitively explain the complexity of the issues that they face. Care leavers with specific needs are receiving appropriate support. The expansion of the service, with increased capacity and clear practice standards, has strengthened the quality of practice with care leavers, creating a culture of excellent support for most young people. Personal advisers (PAs) go to great lengths to keep in touch with care leavers.

Corporate parenting arrangements are exceptionally strong, and priorities are clearly informed by the views of children in care and care leavers. Corporate leaders and elected members made leaving care a protected characteristic in November 2023, enhancing care leavers' rights and entitlements.

Leaders recognise that the transition to the care leaver service is not happening soon enough. They are actively recruiting additional staff across the service in order to reduce the caseloads of PAs and enable earlier transition arrangements.

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

- Earlier transition from the children in care service to the care leaver teams.
- Reduction in the caseloads of PAs.

Main findings

PAs know the young people well and have a thorough understanding of their individual needs and circumstances. They maintain regular and effective contact and offer practical support when needed, such as accompanying them to health appointments and to college interviews. Staff at all levels are highly ambitious for care leavers and advocate strongly on their behalf to ensure that young people secure support and services in line with their assessed needs and best interests. Celebration events hosted by leaders fittingly commend care leavers' many achievements.

Most PAs start direct work with care leavers not long before their 18th birthday. Leaders recognise that this is too late as it weakens the effectiveness of building relationships early with care leavers and of transition planning, particularly for young people with additional needs and poor emotional and mental health. The expansion of the service since the last inspection is helping to reduce caseloads and the active recruitment of additional staff is intended to ensure that PAs become involved with children at a much earlier point.

Persistent and creative efforts are made to stay connected with adult care leavers. At the time of the visit, 163 carer leavers aged over 21 had a dedicated PA and 110 benefited from support under the extended duties. This is a significant improvement since the previous inspection. Young people who opt out of services are routinely informed about the latest local offer, which highlights the support available. For example, it includes updates such as payment for provisional driving licences, lessons and driving tests, and the annual clothing allowance, plus ante-natal and maternity support. Care leavers who are parents or are expecting a baby are supported, both financially and emotionally, to prepare for caring for their children.

Acting on the views of care leavers, the local authority provides tangible support for young people on their journey to independence. Setting-up home allowances and bursaries for university have increased. Care leavers have access to staff discounts and gym membership. They are provided with exclusive access to all adverts for apprenticeships two weeks in advance and are guaranteed an interview if the criteria are met. This is now being adopted by district and borough councils and by a nearby airport, which is a major local employer. The local authority is not complacent; they are considering extending the council tax exemption to 21- to 25-year-olds and matching a £5,000 mortgage deposit for care leavers who are buying their first property.

Pathway plans are co-produced with care leavers; they are detailed, personalised and ambitious. They provide care leavers with information about their entitlements and practical information about their finances. They detail how their needs will be met. Young people's views inform their plans for housing, employment and education. Plans are reviewed regularly and amended to reflect new and emerging needs and support. The use of specific tools provides a helpful visual aid to map care leavers' progress and prioritise needs. Most plans are signed off by managers.

Most care leavers are visited every eight weeks, or more often if required. Effective use of web-based apps and advocacy are available through a commissioned service for care leavers. This enables young people to share their views independently and seek legal advice if required. Care leavers who live out of area and those in custody experience the same quality of proactive support as those who live in West Sussex. This includes regular visits, and they are supported with other needs, for example mental health support, financial help and post-release planning and access to safe housing. Asylum-seeking care leavers live in safe and culturally matched homes and are supported to gain employment and to access higher education.

Vulnerable care leavers who are at risk of criminal exploitation are supported well by their PAs. Effective work with youth offending and probation services and increased referrals to the national referral mechanism are reducing the criminalisation of these young people. This is enhanced by a fortnightly high-risk referral meeting for care leavers over 18 years old, which considers risk to young people missing or at risk of sexual and criminal exploitation. Safeguarding concerns are escalated to senior leaders for their consideration if necessary.

Strong corporate parenting arrangements ensure that priorities are informed by the views of children in care and care leavers. The 'journey to independence' subgroup of the corporate parenting panel is chaired by young people from the care leavers' advisory board (CLAB). Working collaboratively with professionals from health, education, housing and the Jobcentre, the subgroup is a key conduit for constructive challenge. Changes identified and proposed by care leavers influence the dynamic development of the local offer.

The CLAB comprises young people who have been in care in West Sussex and are aged 18 to 25 years. It is chaired by a care leaver and has its own workplan to improve services. The CLAB delivers a 'Total Respect' training course to staff from the West Sussex commissioning service, the virtual school and elected members. This training is also mandatory for foster carers. The board meets fortnightly and has an open membership. Young people have successfully lobbied for the creation of locally based care leavers' hubs. Five of the seven district and borough councils have approved a motion to establish a shopfront-facing community base for care leavers. This will provide a communal space to meet, share experiences and reduce isolation.

Most care leavers live in suitable and safe accommodation, with a good proportion 'staying put' with their foster carers or in specifically commissioned supported

lodgings in preparation for living independently. This localised approach to commissioning housing support means that young people can maintain local links and have access to important local services, such as colleges, employment and training opportunities that will support them to achieve independence. The CLAB planned and delivered a housing conference for providers and districts and borough staff from across West Sussex. They developed a 'participation pack' for professionals to help them to understand the trauma that young people experience. Consequently, the implementation of the West Sussex Joint Housing Protocol enables care leavers to access all West Sussex districts and boroughs when applying to housing registers, as opposed to being limited to their local district. Effective joint work across the partnership, augmented by dedicated and co-located housing support officers in the care leaving service, is successfully preventing care leavers from becoming homeless.

In addition, West Sussex launched the House Project in January 2023. This provides intensive support for care leavers to live independently in permanent homes. Eleven young people graduated. Of those 11, eight young people are living in their own homes. Twelve young people have started cohort two and, of those, nine are on track to be housed, with two already allocated properties. This includes young people who have previously required two-to-one support. In May 2024, 15 more young people joined, and it is envisaged that the House project will continue to support 15 care leavers every six months.

A palpable commitment to improvement and innovation has allowed strong practice with care leavers to develop and flourish. Young people told inspectors that leaders value them, their opinions matter to them and that their work translates into meaningful change in how services are delivered. Staff reported that leaders and managers are kind and want the best for their young people. PAs all spoke very positively about the support from visible and available managers and the constant support from their team members. Staff feel valued and listened to and cited how clinical group supervision is improving and supporting their emotional health and well-being.

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

Yours sincerely

Brenda McLaughlin

His Majesty's Inspector