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Dear Ms McGregor

Focused visit to Trafford children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Trafford children's services on 2 and 3 July 2024. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Teresa Godfrey and Gareth Dakin.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for care leavers. This included:

- Support into adulthood.
- Quality and suitability of accommodation.
- Employment, education and training.
- Staying in touch.
- Care leavers at risk of specific harm.

Throughout this letter, care leavers are referred to as care-experienced young people because this is the preferred term in the local authority.

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-experienced young people, social workers and after-care workers.

Headline findings

This was the first focused visit since the full inspection of children's services in December 2022, when the quality and consistency of services for care-experienced young people in Trafford was identified as an area for improvement.

Following the last inspection, senior leaders have welcomed external scrutiny from a sector-led improvement partner, which has enhanced their understanding of the quality of practice and contributed to the implementation of a service improvement plan for the care-experienced service. There is now a council-wide commitment to improving services for care-experienced young people. The corporate parenting strategy has been developed with a new fifth priority, which relates to preparation for adulthood and transition.

Despite a renewed focus on improvement, which has ensured that practice has been strengthened in some areas, progress has been too slow. This means that the quality of support and services to care-experienced young people is too variable.

For some young people, their needs are understood and well met by after-care workers who take the time to get to know them. Other young people do not always benefit from proactive, meaningful relationships with after-care workers. This is sometimes compounded by a lack of consistent effective management oversight, which means that care-experienced young people are not always receiving the support that they need to move successfully into adulthood and independence.

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

- The quality of relationships between young people and their after-care workers.
- The quality of pathway plans.
- The effective coordination of joint working to prevent homelessness.
- The quality and frequency of supervision and management oversight, including the identification and management of risk.
- The support for care-experienced young people in preparing for their transition to independence.

Main findings

For most 16- and 17-year-olds who are about to move out of care, their social workers know them well and speak about them with kindness and sensitivity. Social workers have a good understanding of the needs of 16- and 17-year-olds and they take appropriate action to safeguard and promote these care-experienced young people's well-being.

Most pathway plans for children aged 16 and 17 are well written, comprehensive and timely. Plans are co-produced with children and set out what needs to happen to prepare them for independence. Other professionals involved with the child contribute to these plans, and this is a strength. Children are encouraged to attend and contribute to their reviews. They benefit from independent reviewing officers (IROs) who visit them and make sure that their plans are made with transition to independence in mind.

There is an ambition to allocate an after-care worker shortly after children turn 16, but this is not realised for some children until they are 17. Not all children have the opportunity to build meaningful relationships with their after-care workers before their transition to the care-experienced service when they turn 18.

Most after-care workers have a clear understanding of young people's journey into care and of their support needs. Some after-care workers develop trusting and meaningful relationships with young people, visiting them regularly and in line with their assessed needs. For a small number of care-experienced young people, their after-care workers are not persistent enough in maintaining meaningful contact and do not consistently demonstrate an interest or professional curiosity in their lives. This shortfall, alongside significant gaps in face-to-face contact, means that not all young people benefit from the support that they need.

The quality of pathway plans for care-experienced young people is variable. Most plans acknowledge identity and cultural needs well and reflect young people's social and family networks. This is an area that has been strengthened since the last inspection. Nevertheless, plans are not consistently updated in a timely manner, or, when there has been a significant change in the young person's circumstances, needs and the risks to which they are exposed. This means that specific vulnerabilities are not always clearly articulated in the pathway plan to inform future support.

After-care workers are not always alert to issues of exploitation and risks to vulnerable young people. After-care workers sometimes demonstrate a lack of professional curiosity about young people's day-to-day lives and do not have meaningful relationships with them. This means that after-care workers do not have an understanding of risks and cannot support young people effectively to stay safe or become safe.

Inconsistent management oversight is not cognisant of risk and does not ensure that action is being taken and plans are in place to safeguard these young people. Senior managers have recognised that more needs to be done to ensure that there is effective oversight of this group and to assure themselves that high-risk vulnerable young people are being kept safe.

Most children aged 16 and 17 are receiving some form of education and training which reflects their interests and encourages their development. After-care workers actively consider and promote education or employment with most young people as part of their work. Support, guidance and effective signposting are provided to young people to help them achieve their goals, and this is reflected in their plans. When young people are not in education, employment, or training (NEET) they are referred to, and monitored by, the employment, education, and training (EET) panel. Additional support is provided as appropriate by Connexions, the virtual school, and external agencies. There are a range of opportunities being developed for care

leavers, such as apprenticeships, work experience mentoring and bespoke arrangements.

The health and emotional well-being needs of most care-experienced young people are considered appropriately in their pathway plans. All young people are actively encouraged to access universal services, and most are registered with GPs and dentists. After-care workers understand that most care-experienced young people have experienced significant trauma and recognise when they would benefit from accessing specialist support services. Some care-experienced young people are able to access services such as counselling through university or college, but for others access to specialist support is not always timely. Senior leaders acknowledge that health support to care-experienced young people is an area that requires strengthening.

When young people are not ready to live independently, they are supported to stay with their former carers under 'staying put' arrangements. Some young people moving on from residential homes benefit from staying close support. This enables them to maintain important relationships with those who have played a key role in caring for them.

There are a range of accommodation options available for care-experienced young people in Trafford and most are living in accommodation that is safe and supports their needs. A small number of young people have benefited from the implementation of the House Project in Trafford and have been supported as they successfully transition to independence and having their own tenancy. When housing issues arise, most after-care workers work hard to maintain young people in tenancies where this is possible, or help them move into alternative accommodation. For some young people, joint working with housing is not effective and they are left at risk of homelessness. A small number of young people who inspectors spoke to said they were concerned about risks associated with the location of their accommodation and with their neighbours. Senior leaders are alert to these issues and recognise that there is more work to do in this area. The service improvement plan includes actions in respect of housing options and young people who are at risk of homelessness.

When young people who are unaccompanied asylum seekers leave care, their after-care workers support them to explore their culture and integrate into the local community. Most of these young people are provided with appropriate accommodation and support that is in line with their identified needs.

For Trafford care-experienced young people who are in custody, after-care workers make persistent efforts to maintain contact and see them regularly, even when visits have been declined by the young person. For most of those in custody, after-care workers understand the risks to them from gangs or other risks related to criminality, and this is considered in planning for their safe release.

For some young people who are parents, after-care workers maintain regular contact, and recognise their additional vulnerabilities and support needs. This level of understanding for both the parent and their children is clearly reflected in children's plans, and they are provided with the appropriate support they need. A very small number of young people who are parents do not benefit from this, and their after-care workers do not consistently and effectively consider their needs or the needs of their children. Senior leaders have recently taken steps to strengthen the quality of practice in respect of young parents. However, the impact of this work is yet to be seen.

Since the last inspection, the council has revised and strengthened the local leaving care offer. Care-experienced young people are able to access council tax support, leisure passes, bus travel and driving lessons. After-care workers are aware of and can describe the local offer, and pathway plans prompt them to ensure that key entitlements and needs are addressed. The young people inspectors spoke to were aware of the offer and how to access it and inspectors saw that young people were accessing their entitlements. Care-experienced young people have also had their status recognised as a protected characteristic.

Since the last inspection, there has been a review of the service operating model and care-experienced young people over the age of 21 in Trafford are now made aware that they are entitled to receive a service until they are 25. Contact has been made with those young people over the age of 21. Senior leaders remain alert to the need to review the service to this group of young people on a regular basis, as the quality of support provided to care-experienced young people over 21 is inconsistent.

After-care workers report manageable but high workloads. However, they say that this has an impact on them being able to meet all young people's needs and have purposeful and regular contact with them. After-care workers do not always proactively engage young people, who do not always see them as trusted adults to whom they can turn when they need help or advice. Senior leaders recognise there is a need for cultural change in the service and for a more proactive approach to be embedded.

After-care workers describe senior managers as visible and available. They also describe recent improvements in the regularity of supervision, their access to management support and bespoke training which helps them in their role. However, there are significant gaps in supervision for most after-care workers and the quality of supervision is variable. Supervision lacks reflection and professional challenge. When actions are recorded, these are not consistently timebound or linked to outcomes and impact for young people. The absence of effective management oversight has led to plans for young people not being driven forward effectively, risks not always being recognised and reactive rather than proactive practice not being challenged.

Change and instability across the layers of leadership and management have hindered the pace of progress in the care-experienced service. This has resulted in insufficient management oversight, impacting on the experience and progress of care-experienced young people. Senior managers recognise that areas for improvement are linked to persistent staffing issues within the service. A review of the service configuration, staffing resources and roles is underway, and steps have been taken to increase capacity through targeted recruitment.

Although quality assurance activity is taking place in this area of practice, audit and moderation are completed by managers from within the service and audits are not routinely completed in collaboration with social workers and after-care workers. This means that there is a lack of objective challenge and learning opportunities are missed. As a result, audit activity is not sufficiently supporting the improvement of practice and outcomes for care-experienced young people.

Senior managers have implemented a care-experienced young people's service development plan. They acknowledge that there has not been sufficient traction to drive improvement and cultural change at pace but are determined to make the necessary improvements in services for care-experienced young people in Trafford.

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

Yours sincerely

Teresa Godfrey
His Majesty's Inspector