

Report to Cabinet

1 October 2024

Ofsted Focused Visit to West Sussex local authority children's services: Local Authority Arrangements for Care Leavers aged 18 to 25 years old

Report by Vince Clark, Interim Director of Children, Young People and Learning

Electoral divisions: All

Summary

1. Headline Findings

- 1.1 This report summarises the outcome of West Sussex County Councils 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. Ofsted's findings were published on 23 August 2024 and can be viewed [here](#). They are also attached as Appendix A to this report.
- 1.2 Inspectors do not make a graded judgement at the outcome of a focused visit. The outcome is shared as findings in a published letter, highlighting strengths and areas for improvement for the council. During their visit inspectors focused on:
- Quality and suitability of accommodation
 - Employment, education, and training
 - Support into adulthood
 - Staying close and in touch
 - Care leavers with specific needs (unaccompanied asylum seekers, young parents or those who have had contact with the criminal justice system)
 - Disabled care leavers and those with specific physical or mental health needs, including those who misuse alcohol or drugs
 - Care leavers at risk of specific types of harm, such as criminal or sexual exploitation and domestic abuse
- 1.3 The Headline finding of the West Sussex focused visit:
- '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'.

- 1.4 This outcome is in line with the services own self-evaluation prior to the inspection. The letter provides details of the experiences of our care leavers and identifies aspects of the service and our 'Local Offer' that are effective and those that require further attention. The letter provides a list of 'what needs to improve in this area of social work practice' that the service needs to consider. The letter notes that all the areas of improvement were already reflected in the services self-evaluation and continual improvement plan, as such, activity is already underway to address them.
- 1.5 The report has been shared with the Care Leavers Advisory Board and the Corporate Parenting Panel on publication. The findings align with our wider Children's Services' self-evaluation, undertaken prior to the focused visit. Its detailed findings will be the subject of a full analysis and will inform and build on our continual improvement planning process and will be monitored by the Children, Young People and Learning Directorate Leadership Team and the Corporate Parenting Panel.

Recommendation

Cabinet is asked to note and comment on this report and the attached Ofsted focused visit letter.

Background

2. The Focused Visit Findings

- 2.1 The letter provides evidence of some very effective services performing well and some areas of variability that require attention. The visit also noted that West Sussex has strength and ambition within its leaders, who know their service and have appropriate plans in place to improve service provision.
- 2.2 Amongst those aspects of the service that are **performing well**, the inspectors noted; that the service had created a culture of excellent support for care leavers and that leaders value them, their opinions matter to them, and that their work translates into meaningful change in how services are delivered. It was also noted that most pathway plans strongly reflect the voice of our young people and sensitively explain the complexity of the issues that they face. The expansion of the service, with increased capacity and clear practice standards, has strengthened the quality of practice that our care leavers experience, creating a culture of excellent support for most young people. The councils personal advisers go to great lengths to keep in touch with care leavers and our 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.

- 2.3 Amongst those aspects of the service where **improvement is required**, the inspection noted; leaders recognise that the transition to the care leaver service is not happening soon enough and the council are actively recruiting additional staff across the service to reduce the caseloads of personal advisers and enable earlier transition arrangements.
- 2.4 Children Services had previously recognised that improvements were required in these areas, and its own self-evaluation aligns closely with the views of the inspectors. Plans are in place to provide long term and sustainable improvements in these areas, which had been implemented prior to the visit. This provided inspectors the opportunity to witness the positive impact of this activity and the significant progress made since the Ofsted ILACS inspection in March 2023. This alignment provides a sound evidence base as to the accuracy of both our self-evaluation and improvement planning and implementation.

3. Next Steps – responding to the Inspection findings

3.1 The areas where improvements are required are as follows:

Areas for improvement
Earlier transition from the children in care service to the care leaver teams.
Reduction in the caseloads of personal advisers.

3.2 The senior leadership team is fully focused on sustained improvement of these parts of the service and has accelerated its action plan to build a strong evidence base to demonstrate the positive changes being enacted. The leadership team is committed to providing improvement at pace but also ensuring it is fully embedded, sustainable and that it leads to permanent improvement in our care leavers lived experiences and outcomes.

4. Resources

- 4.1 There remains a full commitment to providing the right resources to support continued service improvement as reflected by the 2024/25 budget investment already agreed.
- 4.2 In addition, resources to support the implementation of the transformation and improvement work will be provided through the council delivering a consultation and engagement programme with all our care leavers; ensuring our young people’s voices shape, influence and a drive 5-year care leavers protected characteristic strategy.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Focused visit to West Sussex local authority children's services:
Local Authority Arrangements for Care Leavers aged 18 to 25 years old.

Background papers

None