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Dear Darryl

### **Monitoring visit to Herefordshire children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Herefordshire children's services on 21 and 22 February 2024. This was the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in July 2022. His Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Alison Smale and Janet Fraser.

### **Areas covered by the visit**

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- Children in care aged 16 and 17 years old.
- Care leavers.

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

### **Headline findings**

Plans to improve services have not led to sufficient positive impact for care leavers and 16- and 17-year-olds in care in Herefordshire. Planned changes to services have either not been implemented or have only been put in place very recently. The quality of practice for care leavers remains inconsistent and children in care experience too many changes of social worker, which hinders progress in meeting their needs. Some older children in care and care leavers with more complex needs are not sufficiently prioritised, both by children's social care and by key agencies. Senior leaders have ensured that significant additional funding has been put into the service and agreed for the next few years, but this has not yet resulted in improvement.

### **Findings and evaluation of progress**

Too many older children in care experience changes of social worker. Although social workers get to know their young people and have conversations with them about

their wishes and experiences, for some young people, this disruption in their relationship with a trusted adult leads to drift in progression of their plans.

For many young people, the allocation of a personal adviser (PA) as they become young adults does not take place at an early enough stage. PAs maintain contact and support young people after the age of 21, when they want and need this.

Although capacity has improved and workloads reduced, a rigid approach to routine visiting at the minimum required frequency, means that too many young people are not seen frequently enough when their needs are more complex or in response to changes in their circumstances. Less formal contact via messaging is not recorded on the young person's file. Managers do not make clear in their guidance and direction to PAs when visiting should be much more frequent. This prevents PAs supporting some young people effectively to make progress in important areas of their lives.

The quality of pathway plans remain variable. Too many pathway plans are either not updated when circumstances change or are not sufficiently detailed and action based to achieve sufficient progress for young people. Combined with minimal visiting patterns, this leads to drift and a reactive approach to the circumstances of some young people with more complex needs, when this could have been predicted earlier and progressed at greater pace. Pathway plans contain too much historic information copied insensitively from the file, rather than reflecting what the young person feels is important about their personal story. Some pathway plans, although written to children, use jargon. They do not appear authentic when written in the first person. Stronger plans more clearly capture the young person's own words.

The local authority has made a concerted effort to hold young people's reviews in person. While the number of reviews held face to face has increased, a significant minority are held remotely. Too many do not include other professionals involved with the young person. For those young people, appropriate and up-to-date information is not shared effectively. Professionals involved are not fully aware or taking responsibility to complete actions agreed to meet the young person's unmet needs.

Older young people in care and care leavers are encouraged to enjoy a range of activities. PAs are familiar with the local offer and support care leavers to access it. Pathway plans do not outline the full offer or contain a link to the offer, so young people are overly reliant on what individual PAs tell them. As a result, the local authority cannot be assured that all care leavers know their rights and entitlements.

Care leavers have access to services which include counselling support, guidance around substance misuse and budgeting advice and support. But there are gaps in provision, particularly in relation to mental health, education opportunities for those not in education, employment or training and the sufficiency of good local accommodation.

The physical health needs of young people are reflected in pathway plans. However, the complex needs of young people with more significant needs are not sufficiently understood or met by the leaving care service and partner agencies. Counselling is offered but care-experienced young people in Herefordshire do not have access to more specialist services to meet more complex mental health needs. Although there are plans to improve this, the well-being of some young people with more complex needs deteriorates, as provision is not in place now.

Some care leavers do well at college and in employment. However, a significant number are not in education, employment or training, either repeatedly or for too long. In these circumstances, pathway plans do not contain clear enough actions to make progress with this. Routes to get advice and support for education, training and employment are not sufficiently clear and this delays resolution for many young people.

Many older children in care and care leavers live in stable accommodation which meets their needs. For those care-experienced young people who benefited from positive long-term fostering relationships, a higher proportion than the national average transition to staying put arrangements. Furthermore, some young people benefit from successful supported arrangements with families in the local area. These more stable placements and relationships enable young people to do better in education and other parts of their lives as they grow towards independence.

Some young people, often with more complex needs, are in unsuitable or unstable accommodation arrangements. While some of these are actively supported to find and accept suitable accommodation, others are vulnerable, without sufficient support. A small number of young people told inspectors during this visit about disruption to their accommodation through no fault of their own and described living in places where there are concerns about cleanliness. A new housing specialist has very recently been appointed, based in the care leavers team, but it is too early to see an impact.

Most young people who are separated from family and seeking asylum are placed some distance from the local authority area and this limits oversight. As with other young people, visiting is not sufficiently frequent. Safeguarding issues for some young people in their placements have resulted in disruption. Since the last monitoring visit, it is positive that a small number have been placed in Herefordshire and work is under way to provide a sustainable and inclusive approach to meet their needs locally in future. Lack of college education opportunities locally in Herefordshire, which should be in place for September this year, is a significant barrier currently for these young people. Establishment of the United Friends group is a positive step forward to provide peer support for these young people to socialise and network, but as a vehicle for participation is at a very early stage in its development.

Although there is some inconsistency in practice, PAs work sensitively with many care leavers who are also parents, including those supported by children's social care.

Leaders and senior managers have updated and created new strategies which form the basis of their vision for the service, but many are still in the process of being formally agreed. A refresh of the corporate parenting board has resulted in improved attendance. However, there remains a lot of work to do to improve the board, on work which is recent or still being developed. Despite engagement by senior managers and leaders with partners in a number of forums, insufficient ownership, challenge and support from partners continues to have a detrimental impact, on individual children's needs being met and on strategic progress in creating the conditions for good services to be provided to vulnerable children and young people.

Meaningful involvement and participation by children and young people are mostly in the early stages of development. Positive steps are being taken to encourage participation and the voice of care leavers with the establishment of a range of groups and a new participation officer post in the care leavers' service. The impact of this work is not yet having a wide enough impact.

Recent enhancements made by leaders to the care leaver offer mean it is now comprehensive. Initiatives are being advanced for approval, such as putting care leavers into housing priority band A and providing apprenticeships for them. The timeline for delivery is unclear and taking too long. Leaders have raised the expectations of young people, who have subsequently expressed disappointment as promises made directly to care leaver representatives have not been delivered.

Progress has been made, through several well-attended events, to train staff and managers to support the new strength-based and relational practice model. The workforce establishment project has introduced enhanced welcome and retention payments, but this has not resulted in improved recruitment and retention. Further initiatives are in the pipeline.

Significant progress has improved the quality of audits, but their impact remains inconsistent. Despite senior management oversight, agreed actions are not followed through and some children continue to experience inadequate practice, reflecting weaker management oversight and direction in parts of the service.

Social workers are now involved in the audit process through reflective conversations. The involvement of team managers is less consistent, which limits the impact of audits. Some young people are increasingly involved in their audit and this is a strength when it happens and adds substantial insight into the impact for the young person. A moderation process is now established for audits, which is improving consistency in the grading and understanding of the quality of audits.

Implementation of learning from reviews by the local authority and key partners is not sufficiently proactive or timely. Some issues and barriers facing care leavers, identified in this monitoring visit, had already been identified in learning from reviews. While leaders are addressing these areas, for some young people with more complex needs, there is still insufficient understanding or measures are not in place to proactively address their needs on a multi-agency basis. As a result, their needs may well escalate.

While senior leaders have an improved understanding of the quality of services, it is not sufficiently comprehensive. There has been improvement in the quality of the data and performance reports brought to the improvement board and available to leaders. However, full oversight and scrutiny are still hindered by small inconsistencies in reported data, which undermine confidence in reliability. A complete self-evaluation has not been completed, despite it being over a year since the last inspection, when the authority was judged inadequate. Data is now accompanied by more useful analysis, but there is little information about the impact on children of the changes being implemented.

Managers in the care leaver service have not benefited from planned improvements to performance management systems. Practice supervision is not of consistent quality. Most team managers have undertaken a management programme in recent months. While some more recent supervision is purposeful and critically more challenging, much supervision does not challenge or effectively ensure actions are followed through and completed in a timely way.

The senior management team is now much more stable, visible and supportive. PAs and social workers feel valued and well supported. Those who have worked in the service for longer are very positive about the improvements being implemented. These are resulting in workloads becoming more manageable, with increased capacity in the service and increase in capacity to provide activities and opportunities for young people.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Alison Smale  
**His Majesty's Inspector**