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Ms Sally Rowe
Walsall Borough Council
Civic Centre
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Dear Ms Rowe,

Focused visit to Walsall Borough Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Walsall Borough Council children's services on 25 and 26 September 2018. The inspectors were John Roughton, HMI, and Diane Partridge, HMI.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for care leavers, including the preparation of relevant children in care for the transition to adulthood.

Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including discussions with social workers, personal advisers and managers. They met with a group of care leavers and the lead officers responsible for accommodation provision and employment, education and training. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

Overview

The local authority has made progress in all areas with recommendations from the last inspection that relate to care leavers. The local authority has good awareness of the key strengths and areas for improvement within the service. There is a growing corporate sense of responsibility for care leavers. This, in conjunction with the energy and vision created by the new executive director of children's services and her senior team, is resulting in improving outcomes for care leavers.

The local authority is keeping in touch with the vast majority of its care leavers, who are in most cases living in suitable accommodation. Increasing numbers of care leavers are actively engaged in education, training or employment. However, access to health histories for care leavers remains underdeveloped and the accessibility of information about rights and entitlement of care leavers needs to be improved.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The accessibility of written and virtual information for care leavers about their rights and entitlements.
- Care leavers to be helped to understand the significance of their health history and to receive a written copy of their health passport.
- Quality assurance arrangements to better inform practice improvement and service development.

Findings

- Children leaving care and care leavers in Walsall benefit from a highly committed and stable staff group of social workers and personal advisers, who know their children well. These social workers and personal advisers develop respectful and meaningful relationships and hold appropriate aspirations for their children. Personal advisers are tenacious and creative in their efforts to stay in touch with care leavers. Care leavers spoken to highly value their personal advisers and describe them as often 'going the extra mile'.
- Further investment in the service is being made by the local authority, with two additional personal advisers being recruited in order to reduce caseloads. The aim of this is to ensure earlier engagement with relevant children in care as well as to offer support for those care leavers who need it up to the age of 25.
- The vast majority of relevant children and care leavers have a timely and effective pathway plan. Children with disabilities benefit from early discussions with their social workers, personal advisers and adult services to plan for their transition. Pathway planning increasingly demonstrates the high challenge and high support ethos being encouraged in Walsall. However, some written pathway plans do not reflect the quality of relationships and purposeful direct work evidenced in discussions with workers. Care leavers are currently engaged in a project to design a new format for pathway plans that is more meaningful for them.
- Workers speak highly of their managers and the quality of supervision and support they receive from them and their peers, including regular team meetings and reflective group case discussions. Senior leaders are visible to the service and workers understand corporate aspirations for care leavers and the role they play in achieving these. Morale in the service is high. Workers can feel the impact of increased stability in the management group, as well as the accessibility of managers. Access to training is good, and the assessed and supported year in employment process for newly qualified social workers is recognised as a very positive experience for those who have been through this in Walsall.

- Supervision records are of a consistently high quality, with reflective discussions and restorative actions supporting practice. They are focused on improving children's experiences and outcomes.
- The local authority has recognised the need to strengthen corporate parenting arrangements, in order to ensure greater scrutiny and challenge of, as well as greater focus on, the experience and outcomes for children in care and care leavers. Pace has increased, with the lead member chairing the board. Sub group activity is helping to drive progress across its appropriate thematic priorities, and the positive appointment of a children's champion is of additional benefit.
- A focus group of children and young people has met regularly to inform the design of the refreshed children in care council (CICC). Children and young people spoken to are increasingly aware of the CICC, and new members have been recruited. Walsall has ambitious plans to actively encourage care leavers to participate and share their views. A survey of care leavers about their experience of the service has received 44 responses.
- Care leavers increasingly benefit from good education, employment and training (EET) opportunities. A range of well-embedded and systematic approaches ensure that all care leavers' EET needs are understood and responded to in a tailored way. Creative solutions to support care leavers into EET have been enhanced by the Black Country local authorities' 'impact project' support and funding. The council-wide commitment to the 'endless possibilities' apprenticeship scheme, the corporate mentoring and the 'aspire to university' project have all contributed to the improvement of EET outcomes for care leavers in Walsall. This is a very positive start, with more work planned to engage the wider Walsall economy in offering further such opportunities.
- Care leavers spoken to feel safe and secure where they live. They are supported to move towards independence at a pace appropriate to their individual needs. A comprehensive range of housing options for care leavers considered through joint assessment by children's and housing services ensures that care leavers have accommodation that meets their needs. This includes commissioned floating support and access to energy champions to negotiate 'best deals' for energy and water supplies. Children are actively encouraged and enabled to stay put with their foster carers after the age of 18 where this is what they want and is in their interests.
- Care leavers do not consistently have access to or understand their full health histories. Local authority performance data shows that 78% of care leavers who turned 18 during 2017/18 have received their health passports. Workers spoken to are not confident that young people have received this, and it is not clear how workers are able to ensure that this has happened. Only one of the care leavers spoken to has their health passport. Many are not aware of the importance of their health history or their entitlement to their health passport document.

- The importance of good mental health and the emotional well-being of care leavers is given appropriate consideration in planning processes by social workers and personal advisers. However, waiting times for some child and adolescent mental health services are lengthy and other services are at full capacity and have no prompt availability. This means that children and care leavers are not always getting the help they need in a timely way in order to prevent escalation of risks or needs. To bridge this gap, and so that children and care leavers are not left without the help they need, the local authority has directly commissioned bespoke services, for example private counsellors.
- Care leavers do not have a clear or consistent understanding of their rights and entitlements. Accessible written and virtual information is not readily available. There is a lack of awareness of the importance of this for young people in the service. The corporate parenting board has an action to address this. This needs to gather more pace.
- Senior leaders recognise that quality assurance arrangements need to improve, and a review is currently under way. Audit quality is variable and, although a recent service specific audit has taken place, it is too soon to gauge the impact of this. Learning from audits is not yet sufficiently embedded to contribute to practice improvements or strategic planning.

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

Yours sincerely

John Roughton

Her Majesty's Inspector