

Clive House  
70 Petty France,  
Westminster,  
London SW1H 9EX

T 0300 123 1231  
**Textphone** 0161 618 8524  
[enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)  
[www.gov.uk/ofsted](http://www.gov.uk/ofsted)



9 May 2018

Caroline O'Neill  
Strategic Director  
Care, Wellbeing and Learning  
Gateshead  
Civic Centre  
Regent Street  
GATESHEAD  
NE8 1HH

Dear Caroline,

### **Focused visit to Gateshead Council children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Gateshead Council children's services on 20 March 2018. The inspectors were Jan Edwards, HMI, and Ian Young, HMI.

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

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including discussions with care leavers, social workers, personal advisers and senior managers. They also looked at performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

### **Overview**

The council and senior leaders have embraced the role of corporate parents, taking determined steps to raise the ambition for care leavers and making them a high priority.

Senior leaders and managers understand the challenges of delivering a service for this group of young people and know where they need to focus on developing practice. The local authority's commitment to continuous improvement of the service is clear. However, the strategic ambition for care leavers is not fully realised in all aspects of operational practice.

Children who leave care in Gateshead benefit from the support of a dedicated group of personal advisers who have the skills to develop trusting relationships to facilitate effective direct work. However, the pathway planning and plans written by personal

advisers and seen by inspectors are of poor quality, and young people need to be better engaged with their own plans. Management oversight of pathway planning lacks sufficient rigour.

Care leavers have access to an impressive range of creative initiatives to support them into education, employment or training. The accommodation offer provides flexible and bespoke housing options so that care leavers benefit from stable, secure and supported housing. These are two significant areas where the local authority has developed very strong practice, improving outcomes for young people.

### **What needs to improve in this area of practice**

- Most pathway plans written by personal advisers could be better. Plans need to: be strengthened to be outcome focused; to evidence that the young person is an active participant; to better consider diverse needs and identity; and to have a meaningful contingency if things go wrong.
- The quality of case management oversight of pathway planning, written plans, and reviewing processes needs to be improved. Managers should ensure that supervision supports personal advisers to maintain a focus on being appropriately ambitious for young people.
- Auditing practice in the care leavers' service needs to be strengthened as a tool for monitoring quality of practice, rather than compliance, and needs to feed into service development and forward planning.

### **Findings**

- Gateshead council places a high priority on supporting care leavers. Senior and political leaders have engaged well with young people, who have challenged them to think about what life is like for young care leavers. Care leavers left a lasting impression on leaders and managers, leading to improvements in how the council fulfils its duties as corporate parents. In August 2017, a number of service directors pledged their commitment to care leavers and this has led to a significant increase in young people being offered training placements.
- Governance arrangements for services to care leavers are firmly in place. The Corporate Parenting Board is clearly sighted on care leavers and is regularly updated on performance and service developments. Young people have a standing invitation to Corporate Parenting Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings twice a year, where they present on topics important to them. One such example is the Digital Me project in which young people developed digital story books of their own lives.

- Senior managers recognise that pathway plans need to be more outcome-focused, and more is needed to be done to improve the overall quality of pathway planning and written plans. Written plans lack focus on longer-term aspirational goals, with identified support from the whole care team. Contingency planning is vague and lacks meaning for young people. Young people told inspectors that they were not clear about the purpose of plans or how they were helping them to achieve their hopes for their future.
- The poor standard of written pathway plans and the absence of a robust mechanism for review means that there are no clear written goals and targets for the young person's future and no coherent understanding of the role the care team can play in delivering a plan.
- The voice of the young person and their contribution to the plan is not always clear. In most cases seen, young people's diverse and unique characteristics are not analysed sufficiently well to inform the plan.
- Although inspectors found that almost all pathway plans by personal advisers could be better, practice by social workers for young people who are aged 16 to 18 is stronger. In these cases, the pathway plans evidenced that good outcomes had been achieved, resilience had been developed, and they were appropriately aspirational for young people.
- While there were significant deficits in the quality of written pathway plans, there was no direct detrimental effect on young people in the cases reviewed by inspectors. They were being well supported, were keeping in touch, and risks were being managed effectively. They were also living in housing that met their needs for security and stability, and most were in some form of suitable employment or education.
- Management processes to support effective casework need to be strengthened. A lack of critical challenge provided through management oversight means that staff supervision is not providing sufficient rigour to drive aspirational plans for children's futures.
- Personal advisers and social workers are committed to young people, know them well and develop trusting and meaningful relationships with them. For some young people, their relationship with their personal advisers has become one of their most important sources of help, support and guidance.
- Young people who present with multiple and complex needs and who are vulnerable to a range of risk factors such as alcohol and substance misuse, mental health or exploitation are well supported to help them understand the risks. Personal advisers could be more proactive in encouraging young parents to think of their employment or training opportunities alongside their parenting role in order to improve their own employment opportunities and the life chances of their child.

- Personal advisers use a range of ways of staying in touch that are proportionate to the needs of the young person, including offering incentives to make contact. As a result, the service is in touch with nearly all of their care leavers, including those in custody and one young person who is currently of no fixed abode. However, there remain a very small number of young people, who, having left care, no longer want contact with the local authority.
- Care leavers spoken to report a mixed picture in respect to the services they receive, although all were positive about the role of the council. They told inspectors that they are aware of their entitlements and access them and know how to make a complaint. None of the care leavers spoken to have any meaningful understanding of pathway planning, they could not describe its purpose and most had not seen their own pathway plan.
- Some young people aged 16–18, had met, but few knew well, the personal adviser they had been allocated to. Young people who had already left care thought they received a good service and knew how to seek help if they had a problem.
- Satisfactory transition arrangements are in place for young people who meet the criteria for adult services. Some evidence was seen of effective joint work with adult services social workers. However, personal advisers are often only nominally allocated to these young people as a point of contact. The absence of pathway plans to support the work of personal advisers with the adult social work team is a missed opportunity to plan the transition of young people with a disability both to adult services and out of care.
- There is a holistic and wide-ranging employment, education and training (EET) offer to care leavers, which means that most eligible young people are in education, apprenticeships or employment. A structured approach to meeting the identified EET needs of young people is administered through the EET panel. This panel matches an exceptionally wide range of resources to young people's specified needs and wishes about how to enter the world of work. The council's own figures show that Gateshead is the third highest provider of apprenticeships in the country and care leavers are increasingly represented in this group. There are four care leavers in apprenticeships in the council, with a further 13 firm offers of apprenticeships across a range of council departments.
- Gateshead council supports a group of highly motivated and aspirational young people who are forging improved opportunities for themselves through work, training or further education. Young people work in a wide range of jobs and 15 young people are studying at university.
- The council provides an impressive range of accommodation options, and this provides choice for young people. Most young people are in suitable accommodation, with those not provided with accommodation accounted for by four young people being in custody and one young person being of no fixed abode.

- The Care Leavers Accommodation and Support Panel (CLASP) considers all young people who are aged 16 plus and formulates a bespoke holistic housing and support plan around young people. While the existing accommodation offer is wide ranging, CLASP identified a gap in lower- and higher-level support, which has led to a commitment by the council to further develop service provision. This includes the provision of supported lodgings commissioned from a national charity, and two residential assessment units with a crash pad provision for emergencies. The units will provide a holistic assessment of need, including psychological assessment and any identified therapy. The new service will come into effect in July of this year.
- Working closely with housing and commissioning, the care leavers' service has the facility to provide taster flats for young people. The tenancy is managed by the local authority, and young people have the option of taking over the tenancy when they feel ready for this responsibility. Taster flats are found for young people in the communities in which they have the most support networks and connections. For example, young people moving out of a specific residential unit or foster home often choose to live close by to maintain their relationships and support systems. Gateshead housing company also provides floating support to young people in the taster flats, which includes mental health and domestic violence support.
- Young people are well prepared for leaving care and independent living by their carers and their personal advisers at a pace which meets their needs. A large majority of young people are successfully living independently. A third sector provider provides structured sessions to young people leaving care on how to manage living independently and to furnish and decorate their flats. The learning and skills department of the council provides a two-day certificated financial education training and advice session, for example the use of credit unions to manage any debt.
- Gateshead council promotes 'staying put' arrangements with former foster carers as an option for care leavers. At the time of the visit, 23 care leavers remained living in their former foster homes beyond their eighteenth birthdays, enabling them to develop skills for independence and adulthood at their own pace in a family environment. Many care leavers who are at university return to their former foster homes during holidays.
- Young people receive a health consultation from the named/specialist nurse before leaving care. All young people who left care in 2017 and 2018 have a health passport, but not all older care leavers have access to their health records in this format. Young people still in care and older care leavers told inspectors that they did not know what the purpose was of the health passport.
- In a small number of cases seen, the emotional well-being or mental health needs of young people are not well recognised in written plans, and many vulnerable care leavers do not benefit from timely support for their mental

health issues. This gap has been recognised by senior managers, and a responsive counselling service can now be spot-purchased for care leavers who require a service that does not meet the criteria for child and adolescent mental health services. The local authority is also working with health partners to improve the delivery of a more responsive and accessible health service.

- Not all care leavers are actively involved in One Voice, Gateshead's Children in Care Council. Senior managers recognise that participation of care leavers can be challenging. As a result, they are addressing new ways of communicating and engaging with these young people to ensure that they have a voice, and are directly involved in service development.
- Auditing arrangements in the care leavers' service are under-developed. Audits are not effective tools for identifying the difference that practice has made to improved outcomes for young people. They are compliance focused rather than qualitatively focused. As a result, it is difficult to understand how auditors are able to reach a judgement on the quality of practice. This limits the opportunity to feed in to strategic and forward planning for care leavers. This is recognised by senior managers and there are plans to address this deficit.

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

Yours sincerely

Jan Edwards  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**