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Dear Mrs Robinson

Focused visit to Hartlepool children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Hartlepool children's services on 18 and 19 January 2022. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Vicky Metheringham and Jo Warburton.

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

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. Inspectors were on site during the visit and carried out a combination of face-to-face and virtual meetings. Inspectors met with care leavers, personal advisers, social workers, managers and leaders.

Headline findings

Determined senior leaders ensure that care leavers are provided with consistent practical, financial and emotional support. Despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, care leavers have continued to experience the same high-quality service as they did prior to the pandemic. Senior leaders have created a relational approach across the whole social work system. This has created conditions for good-quality practice to grow and flourish and has created a culture where care leavers are always in mind, and always in reach.

Highly skilled and effective workers, many of whom have worked in the authority for years, have long-standing and meaningful relationships with young people. They support care leavers exceptionally well to make the transition to becoming young adults in all areas of their lives. Care leavers benefit from a 'one worker' model of practice, which enables them to develop trusting relationships with workers and foster carers. 'Staying put' is actively encouraged and other accommodation options are explored with care leavers at their pace, and only when they are ready to move to independence. Strong agency partnerships, and a highly effective virtual school, work closely with social workers, staff and carers to help care leavers access employment and training opportunities and achieve their ambitions.

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

- The voice and influence of care leavers in developing and owning their individual pathway plan.

Main findings

COVID-19 rates in Hartlepool are consistently above the national average. At a very early stage, senior leaders made the decision that care leavers needed to be seen and supported as usual. The senior leadership team worked closely with the workforce to secure the balance between ensuring the safety and well-being of young people and that of their staff. Buildings remained open to provide face-to-face support throughout the pandemic to care leavers. Care leavers were encouraged to remain living with their foster carers and other carers during the first period of lockdown, and beyond. Leaders recognise that care leavers need the continued support of their carers, to feel safe and remain safe.

Workers know their care leavers exceptionally well. The 'one worker' model provides them with a social worker from the through care team during the time they are looked after until they no longer require a service, irrespective of their age. Care leavers spoken to during the visit told inspectors that they experience excellent support from workers in all areas of their lives. They report that they have strong and supportive relationships with workers who they feel truly care about them.

Inspectors observed persistent workers making relentless efforts to keep in touch with care leavers. They visit them frequently and according to their needs and wishes. Care leavers are seen face to face, even when they live at some distance. Workers keep in touch with care leavers using a range of methods in between face-to-face contact. They know what their rights and entitlements are and have access to an advocate from the National Youth Advocacy Service or an independent visitor if this is required.

Most assessments in pathway plans are detailed and consider all relevant issues for care leavers effectively. They provide a comprehensive range of agreed actions and timescales about when these will be completed, and by whom. Plans reflect care leavers' financial entitlements, and show that they have access to the key documents needed to begin their lives as young adults. Some plans are written to care leavers and avoid jargon, but this approach is still in its infancy. While workers can clearly articulate care leavers' views, this does not always translate into their written individual plans.

Transitions for care leavers are informed by individual assessment of their needs, undertaken by their social worker. Assessments include thoughtful consideration of accommodation needs and longer-term education or training aspirations. Social workers undertake timely work which ensures that care leavers move towards

independence at their own pace. Their transition plans are informed by a thorough understanding of care leavers' experiences and needs.

Care leavers live in a range of safe and appropriate accommodation provision which includes staying put, supported lodgings, independent tenancies and student accommodation. Their views inform where they are going to live and individualised packages of support are developed and followed through. When care leavers progress to into independent living, they see their workers frequently. Workers provide practical, financial and emotional support. This reduces the risk of their tenancies breaking down and ensures that the standards and suitability of their accommodation are continuously assessed and monitored.

Care leavers are encouraged to stay put with their foster carers, even when these arrangements incur additional financial expenditure. Committed foster carers support care leavers to be prepared well for adulthood. Foster carers are well supported with staying put agreements which provide clarity about the support that they will receive. Only a very small number of care leavers are in custody. Workers maintain regular contact with the prison service and young people to ensure that their individual needs are known and assessed, both in prison and in preparation for their release.

The numbers of care leavers engaged in education, employment and training are improving, despite the impact of the pandemic. The number of care leavers accessing university is increasing, with more being prepared to attend this year. A range of options are considered when transitioning from school, including consideration of work experience, apprenticeships, further education and university. A highly effective virtual school head promotes the engagement of care leavers' involvement in further education and training, described by some as the 'nagging parent'.

Care leavers' routine health needs are actively considered, and they are well supported by their carers and workers to attend appointments. Proactive workers support timely referrals to adult services to provide care leavers with continuity of care to maintain their health needs, particularly where they are taking medication. Care leavers report feeling well supported by their workers and foster carers when they experience low mood. The in-house therapeutic team provides filial therapy to foster carers and young people. It also provides consultation to workers and carers.

Risks to care leavers are monitored and reduced through skilful direct work and attention by their workers. Timely and appropriate referrals to other agencies are made through effective multi-agency working.

Senior leaders actively seek feedback from care leavers through the reinvigorated, enthusiastic care leavers group as well as through other methods, including a care leavers ballot. Care leavers are engaged and encouraged to attend corporate parenting panels. During the pandemic, workers continued to reach out to care leavers to provide them with gift vouchers to celebrate their success and commend

them on their achievements. A range of other creative offers of support were provided to them, to enable them to remain connected.

This visit has evidenced a strong and stable senior leadership team whose members show determination and ambition to improve care leavers' outcomes. They use highly effective performance data, which they have created, to focus on care leavers' vulnerabilities, needs and progress. They use this to scrutinise and constructively challenge frontline managers to inform improvement activity. The quality assurance framework provides senior leaders with a consistent line of sight to the quality and impact of practice. Audit and moderation processes are underpinned by a relational and supportive approach. Workers report that their practice is improving as a direct consequence of this approach.

Enthusiastic political leadership, driven by the lead member, means that care leavers are benefiting from their needs being understood and prioritised as any good parent would. Senior leaders and members are rightly very proud of the service and are determined to improve care leavers' outcomes even further. Children's services have received additional financial investment and increased worker capacity to sustain and improve high-quality support to care leavers.

Staff describe feeling valued and supported by senior leaders. Many workers have worked in the authority for many years, showing unstinting commitment to young people. This culture was palpable as inspectors spoke with staff and managers. Staff unequivocally describe visible and approachable senior leaders who communicate well with them. Staff describe their caseloads as being manageable. This assists them to support care leavers exceptionally well. Staff experience personal and case supervision which encourages reflection and a focus on young people and care leavers. Staff and managers report that the training provided to them is improving the quality of their practice.

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

Yours sincerely

Vicky Metheringham
Her Majesty's Inspector