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Dear Ms Gallagher

Focused visit to South Tyneside children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to South Tyneside children's services on 2 and 3 March 2022. The inspectors were Louise Walker, Her Majesty's Inspector and Julie Knight, Her Majesty's Inspector.

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 spoke with care leavers, personal advisers, social workers, managers and leaders. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

Headline findings

Dedicated and committed workers in the integrated looked after children and leaving care teams support young people to prepare for and leave care extremely well. Workers in the leaving care team are led by a knowledgeable and aspirational team manager who provides good support and motivates staff. Supervision is reflective and supporting effective practice; however, this is not consistently documented.

Most young people are benefiting from long-standing, trusting relationships with workers who are emotionally invested in them. Workers provide individually tailored support in accordance with young people's needs and wishes. This relational and strengths-based approach is underpinned by very strong senior leadership leading by example. There is strong corporate parenting support, influence and investment from the lead member and the wider council. A comprehensive local offer, combined with a

range of creative and generous opportunities from the council and its partners, is contributing to positive outcomes for care leavers. Senior leaders know the service well and what needs to improve and develop further.

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

- The recording of supervision to accurately reflect the discussions.

Main findings

Children in care are well supported through the transition into leaving care services and adulthood. Personal advisers (PAs) are allocated when children are 16 years old and introductions and active involvement from the PA are tailored to individual circumstances. Social workers start to plan for transitions by completing pathway plans with children to ensure that their involvement and voice are central to the planning for their future.

Social workers and PAs are committed to young people they work with. They know their young people extremely well, recognising the young people's strengths and risks. They work hard to build strong and lasting positive relationships. One young person described their PA as 'Fantastic; she listened to what I wanted and then did what she said... that is so important.' There is a diverse range of direct work taking place with young people to gain their views and explore their feelings. This informs interventions and support offered.

There is a real focus in South Tyneside on acknowledging achievements that are important to the young person. Workers are clearly proud of how young people overcome challenges in their lives. Workers are very ambitious and have high aspirations for young people. A large celebration event is held annually and young people can bring a 'plus one' so that they can share their achievements with people who are special and important to them.

Pathway plans and planning are effective. Plans and all written records are written to, and where appropriate and possible, with the young person. This places them at the centre of whatever work or activity is being offered and undertaken. The senior leadership team leads by example and has recently changed how decisions for children and young people are recorded to ensure that when children access their records at any time, they understand the decision and the context this was made within.

Contact with a young person is very much dependent on what the young person requests and is reviewed if the young person's needs or circumstances change. PAs provide ongoing practical help, including transport to health appointments and regular emotional support. They advocate for young people to guide and encourage them to make good choices and decisions, supporting and helping them when needed. Support to young people throughout the COVID-19 pandemic continued, with young people

benefiting from regular contact with PAs and from the use of their leisure passes (including the plus ones) when restrictions allowed.

Care experienced young people who are parents are well supported by PAs to be the best parents they can be. Where young people are not able to continue to care for their children, there is effective working across social work teams to ensure that plans are transparent and understood by young people and they are supported to understand and participate in the decision-making meetings about them and their child.

The services and interventions supporting young people into education, employment or training (EET) are very effective and the impact of this is seen in the increase in the percentage of young people in EET over the last 12 months. When young people are not in a position to take up opportunities, there is a range of support services to give young people the confidence to begin looking for work or training led by a dedicated opportunities broker.

A significant number of young adults keep in touch with the leaving care service beyond 25 years old. This is as a result of the ethos that care leavers are the extended family in South Tyneside. When statutory involvement is ending, PAs write a letter to the young adult. This letter lets them know that they can continue to contact the service for as long as they need or come back to the service at any time in the future. The PAs write this letter in such a way that it is individualised, capturing shared memories and thoughtful reflections for the young adults to keep.

Participation and engagement to obtain young people's views are embedded throughout the services and constitute a real strength in South Tyneside. Service developments co-designed with young people are innovative and young people have a service that is meaningful for them. There are many examples where young people have influenced decisions, resulting in activities and outcomes to help improve their life experiences. Young people have been involved in the design of the webpages and wallet-sized leaflets to inform young people of the offer to care leavers in South Tyneside. A handy QR code is included. The care leavers offer is comprehensive and supports the emotional, practical and leisure needs of young people.

The senior leadership team in South Tyneside is strong. Senior leaders, the chief executive and the lead member lead by example and they know the service very well. They recognise and prioritise the needs of care experienced young people and this is reflected in the corporate decision-making and active involvement with the Corporate Parenting Board.

The leadership team is supportive and provides an environment where care experienced young people's voices are heard and acted upon. Managers, in particular the manager of the leaving care service, and practitioners are aspirational for young people and this is supported by a wider council pledge to care experienced young people.

There was evidence of very strong partnership working with South Tyneside Homes to deliver an improved accommodation offer for young people leaving care and moving into independence. The accommodation improvement journey is in the early stages and there is still more to develop and embed, although there is a clear commitment and strategy.

There is effective support to young people who 'Stay Put and Stay Close' where this is their wish to do so. 'Staying put' discussions form part of foster carer recruitment so that carers are fully informed of the expectations of them at the earliest opportunity.

Staff spoke very positively about working in South Tyneside, with workers actively choosing the authority because of the ethos and practice approach. Staff feel supported by managers and stated that senior managers and leaders are visible and approachable and have created a culture which supports innovation and good practice to flourish.

Staff also spoke positively about supervision and case discussion, which provide an opportunity for reflection on practice and offer clear direction and set actions. This was not always evident in the written supervision records seen and this means for some young people opportunities for recorded reflection and actions relating to key events were missed.

Performance and practice oversight is well embedded and effective. The quality assurance framework is well understood by managers and workers. Outcomes of audits are discussed at team meetings and practice workshops, meaning that all practitioners learn from quality assurance activity. This learning loop supports social work practice to continuously develop and flourish.

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

Yours sincerely

Louise Walker
Her Majesty's Inspector