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Dear Joe Tynan

Focused visit to Middlesbrough children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Middlesbrough children's services on 31 July and 1 August 2024. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Sophie Wales and Ceri Evans.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for care leavers aged 18 to 25, with a particular focus on:

- the quality of planning for care leavers over the age of 18 years
- the offer available for care leavers and their knowledge of this
- staying close and in touch
- care leavers with specific needs.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. This visit was carried out entirely on site. Inspectors considered a broad range of evidence, including care leavers' individual records, and undertook case discussions with personal advisers and managers. Inspectors also spoke to care leavers. Inspectors reviewed relevant local authority performance and quality assurance information.

Headline findings

Since the last inspection, where the experience and progress of care leavers was judged as requires improvement to be good, the new leadership team and elected members have demonstrated a tangible commitment to radically improve outcomes for care-experienced young people in the scope of this visit.

The new leadership team is bringing much-needed stability and focus and has plans that are realistic, ambitious and starting to gain traction. Leaders have ensured that there is now sufficient staffing resource to meet demand. They have welcomed external scrutiny and challenge. Performance management and quality assurance

processes have been strengthened but have yet to lead to consistent improvements in frontline management, supervision and training.

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

- Management oversight and the quality of supervision.
- The quality and timeliness of pathway plans.
- The training and guidance available to staff.

Main findings

Senior leaders have an improving line of sight to performance in this area of practice since the last inspection. In the relatively short space of time that the new senior leadership team has been in post, it has very quickly gained an understanding of the lived experience of care-experienced young people in the scope of this visit and know that more needs to be done to improve the service. Senior leaders have credible plans in place to address where practice needs to improve.

The local authority quality assurance framework provides leaders and managers with the knowledge they need to understand and improve practice, which is underpinned through practice standards and a practice model. Learning from audit activity is contributing to the learning cycle.

There are determined efforts by senior leaders to raise the profile of care-experienced young people across the council and the wider partnership. This has included meaningful consultation with care-experienced young people to seek their views. This has led to a more purposeful care leaver offer, which now includes setting care experienced as a 'protected characteristic'. The care leavers offer now reflects the areas of need and support that are most meaningful, including an enhanced clothing allowance, exceptional winter clothing payment and enhanced weekly payment for all young people who live in semi-independent or independent living to support with budget management. Personal advisers ensure that young people are aware of their entitlements and rights. However, this needs to be more routinely captured in their pathway plans to show which part of the offer that they have accessed, have been offered and the impact.

Impressive 'Care Ambassadors' and 'Voice Groups' are gaining more influence in service design and delivery on behalf of care-experienced young people as participation and engagement with care leavers evolve. Senior leaders recognise and place value on young people's meaningful contribution to the appointment of key leaders and the co-chairing of strategic boards. Young people told inspectors that they are treated as equals, feel heard and that senior leaders understand better what it is like to be a care-experienced young person in Middlesbrough.

Personal advisers build trusting relationships with their young people and proudly celebrate their successes. They know their young people's histories well. Personal advisers describe a more positive and changing service and recognise that previous staffing capacity issues are being addressed. This means they can see young people with an increased frequency and purpose.

Some personal advisers write pathway plans with young people. When this happens, young people's wishes and feelings are well recorded and add value to the plan. These plans are written uniquely to the young person, and their achievements and goals are recognised and praised. This is not the experience of all young people. Not all plans are either developed or updated in accordance with the required standards, or when there has been a significant change in circumstance.

Contingency plans lack sufficient arrangements should plans fail or need adapting. This means young people cannot always be certain what alternative arrangements have been made for them or what the professional network needs to do better. The quality of pathway plans is dependent on the tenacity and experience of the individual personal adviser. There is currently insufficient frontline management oversight, training and support to personal advisers to help them be more professionally curious, assess individuals' needs and develop resultant and meaningful pathway plans with them.

Personal advisers recognise the importance of wider support networks for care-experienced young people. Personal advisers encourage and support young people to remain in contact with people that are important to them or re-establish relationships with people that matter to them when appropriate. Young people value and benefit from this level of care and attention to their needs.

A growing number of care-experienced young people live in suitable accommodation that supports their needs. Senior leaders know there is more to do to improve the choice of accommodation options for young people, particularly those who live in temporary accommodation. Senior leaders are acutely aware of these challenges and are in active consultation with strategic partners to find appropriate housing solutions.

Care-experienced young people are able to 'stay put' with their former carers when this is the right plan for them. This means they can maintain enduring relationships with people who know and care for them well into adulthood. Some care-experienced young people aged over 18 live in appropriate supported lodgings, where they receive the practical and emotional support they need from someone they have a trusting relationship with. Inspectors were able to see where this provided an important stepping stone into independence and higher-level education for some care-experienced young people. Positively, as corporate parents, the local authority provides healthy financial packages to support with the costs of living independently and maintaining accommodation while studying.

Support for vulnerable care-experienced young people and those with more specific needs is well considered and mostly effective. The local authority is now in touch with more young people than it was at the time of the last inspection as it has made deliberate and targeted efforts to ensure that care-experienced young people are aware of their entitlements. For those young people with emotional well-being and mental health needs, a dedicated mental health practitioner provides invaluable assessment and advice to the service.

When care-experienced young people are in custody, they are not always visited at a frequency that meets their needs or at the level a good parent would. Senior leaders recognise they need to do more to challenge partner agencies to ensure relevant and appropriate support. This is particularly so in relation to probation, to ensure that support is in place before young people leave custody and to assist with plans to reduce the risk of their reoffending.

Most unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers experience support that helps them achieve their goals and succeed in education and training. Personal advisers carefully consider their identity needs, and most live in suitable accommodation.

There are clear and active plans to develop a local hub for care-experienced young people. As this plan is in progress, interim arrangements are in place to provide access to support through community hubs across the borough.

A key finding throughout this visit was that personal advisers provide care-experienced young people with support, but this is most often without the guidance and supervision of a frontline manager. Leaders have recognised that personal advisers need more direction, support, challenge and training through strengthened management oversight and supervision and have brought in additional capacity to drive this forward.

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

Yours sincerely

Sophie Wales
His Majesty's Inspector