

14 November 2024

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Dear Stuart

Monitoring visit to South Tyneside children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to South Tyneside children's services on 15 and 16 October 2024. This was the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in May 2023. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Jan Edwards and Jo Warburton.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made since the last judgement inspection, published in May 2023, for:

- Care leavers and children transitioning from care.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Headline findings

At this monitoring visit, inspectors have considered some elements of the experience and progress of care leavers. Since the last inspection, leaders have made positive improvements for the benefit of the majority of South Tyneside care leavers. Care leavers told inspectors that they are grateful for the support and services that they are offered, with the exception being the lack of appropriate choice of housing options for them. There remain a very small number of care leavers aged over 18 years old who have been temporarily placed in bed and breakfast accommodation. Leaders understand that this cannot meet the needs of these care leavers and are seeking to address this issue as a priority.

Findings and evaluation of progress

During this visit, inspectors' findings aligned with leaders' own understanding of the quality of the care leavers' service, which was reflected in their self-evaluation. Leaders have a good understanding of their strengths as well as the areas they need

to improve. Additional investment in the service has created a middle layer of management. This will increase management capacity from November 2024 in order to provide focused oversight for children in care and care leavers.

Politicians and leaders take their corporate parenting responsibility seriously. They have ensured that all young people are automatically offered support until they reach the age of 25 years, unless the young person states they no longer need it. Furthermore, the 'Always Here' offer ensures that, no matter how long ago someone left care, they can ask the leaving care team for advice and support.

The vast majority of children and young people reviewed and spoken with on this visit have had a positive experience of being a care leaver in South Tyneside. This includes their experience of assessment and planning, support and assistance. The care leavers' service has a stable and permanent workforce. This stability ensures that most care leavers benefit from building secure, trusting relationships with their personal adviser (PA). This relational approach provides the cornerstone for effective support and for young people to make progress. However, a small number of older care leavers have experienced too many changes of PA since leaving care, which has affected their ability to form these consistent and impactful relationships.

The transition from care is supported through the timely allocation of a PA. Children develop a clear understanding of the role of the PA and the opportunities provided by the leaving care team. Members of the transition panel start to plan early for the ongoing support needs of disabled children. This supports the timely assessment of children's continuing care needs.

Care leavers benefit from frequent visiting and a high level of support when they need it. PAs keep in touch with young people, in between visits, through text and social media, and young people regularly reach out to them. All of the PAs spoken to on this visit are aspirational for their young people and encourage them to strive for their own goals and dreams. As a result, a significant number of care leavers are in some form of education, employment or training and are actively engaged in their hobbies and interests.

It is clear that PAs can provide appropriate challenge to young people when they go 'off track', while also providing high levels of support and care. One young person has spoken about her PA being the only person who has stuck with her, who cares about her but also tells her how it is. As a result, there is mutual trust and respect.

Goodbye letters written by PAs to young people on reaching the age of 25 years are personalised tributes to them. They demonstrate the PA's pride, privilege and tenacity, and the care they have shown to their young people. They ensure that young people will know they have had someone in their life who has stuck with them, cares about them, and that they can be there for them in the future should they need it. There are many former care leavers over the age of 25 who remain in regular contact with their previous PA. They routinely check in with them when they

need advice and guidance or a listening ear, or they attend the care leavers' hub to socialise and play sports.

PAs undertake creative and bespoke pieces of work which have been adapted to meet the needs of young people. Specific work is completed, for example, on healthy relationships, domestic abuse and coercive control. PAs help young people to understand their care history through sensitive life-story work, and access to records. When PAs have difficulty engaging young people, as a result of their traumatic histories and anxiety about trusting professionals, they persist sensitively in their visits and engagement. PAs celebrate their young people's achievements, through small acts such as a walk on the beach or a coffee as well as the larger celebration events planned by the service.

PAs know their young people very well and can 'tune in' to when things are going badly for them, providing reassurance and encouragement to attend well-being activities. Children and young people's health needs are well identified. All are registered with doctors and most, but not all, have dentists, potentially leaving some young people without the dental care they need. Leaders have addressed this for children in care and know this needs to be developed further for care leavers.

The leaving care team benefits from a number of specialist workers, such as the emotional well-being coordinator and opportunities broker, who provide added value to the wraparound holistic support of care leavers. Young people are offered individual counselling at their pace as well as signposting to other services. Young people's well-being is addressed through a range of mediums, resulting in high levels of engagement in counselling and participation in positive activities. These include the garden allotment and the well-being walks, as well as group sports such as badminton and football. Care leavers told inspectors that they highly value these more informal approaches to support. They said that their physical and emotional well-being and mental health are improving because of the service they are receiving. When young people disengage or do not feel ready for counselling, the counsellor acts as a point of contact for young people in the future.

The opportunity broker provides a specific focus on developing opportunities for care leavers for work, education or training. Young people have benefited from a range of employability projects with local businesses and apprenticeships with the NHS. Successful stepped programmes support young people to gain work experience before achieving permanent employment. In addition, leaders have been responsible for the development of paid sessional worker posts for care leavers, which are highly valued by them as providing unique work experience. There are currently 13 sessional workers who are involved in providing the 'expert by experience role' on interview panels, and who lead twice yearly consultations with care leavers. There is a potential for a further 40 sessional work posts, further expanding opportunities for care leavers to enhance their career prospects.

The care leavers local offer is a strong and inclusive offer written in an accessible format and easily located through the use of a QR code. Care leavers told inspectors

that South Tyneside's offer is generous, particularly in relation to the support offered in their employment, education and training and for their well-being.

Although leaders have introduced a range of programmes which have the potential to lead to full-time employment, the council has been slow to deliver on ring-fenced apprenticeship opportunities. The leadership team have recognised this and have sought promises from other directorates in the council in a recent leaders' exchange event, resulting in potential offers of future ring-fenced apprenticeships. There are currently four young people benefiting from apprenticeships in a large local business and the local NHS provider.

Some of the care leavers who spoke with inspectors said that there is not enough appropriate homes available, leading to them living in poor areas or out of area. Tenacious work with housing services has ensured that young people will not be deemed intentionally homeless. New points of contact in every locality are improving communication and inter-agency working.

The multi-agency accommodation panel is beginning to effectively support many young people to maintain their tenancies. Risks of tenancy breakdown or homelessness are identified and addressed early and alternative housing options are explored. A review of the homelessness prevention fund found that this was underutilised to support young people with rent arrears. Consequently, the fund is now starting to be used to good effect for those young people on low income who have accrued significant rent arrears. For some care leavers, the work of the panel has been less effective in preventing no warning evictions, resulting in a small number of young people living in bed and breakfast emergency accommodation for short periods of time. This is compounded by a lack of choice of supported accommodation which can sustain placements for young people through times of crisis, and is also due to a lack of alternative appropriate emergency accommodation. For the short periods care leavers are in emergency accommodation, they are rightly considered by the team to have increased vulnerability and to be high risk. They receive increased contacts with their PA, who monitors their continued circumstances and well-being. Leaders recognise that there is still work to be done with some providers who evict without notice, leaving young people over the age of 18 temporarily homeless.

Leaders understand that bed and breakfast accommodation cannot meet the needs of care leavers who require a stable and secure home. They are seeking to address this through the strategic commissioning of a mixed economy of housing options, in part supported through the main housing provider returning under the council's remit. This will support timely escalation of care leavers housing needs to senior management across directorates and promote care leavers needs in the wider council's housing strategy.

PAs effectively use 'My World My Plan', a bespoke assessment tool, to understand care leavers' lived experiences and their wishes and feelings. Pathway Planning is mostly effective in identifying the young person's needs, strengths and vulnerabilities

and is explicit about what young people can expect to receive through the local offer. They are mostly developed collaboratively and co-produced with young people. Managers know that they could be clearer in capturing the young person's direct voice and their views. Young people told inspectors that they saw little point in having a pathway plan, especially as they got older. There are appropriate contingency plans should things go wrong so that young people are clear about what would happen. Pathway plans are reviewed regularly, but this review is not always brought forward when their circumstances change, including when young people go into custody. This means that the plan does not always fully reflect the young person's current circumstances.

When risks and vulnerabilities increase for young people PAs undertake an assessment, leading to appropriate safety planning. The manager regularly reviews the vulnerability tracker, and this ensures that risk is on everyone's radar. Risks identified as red or amber result in increased supervision, enhanced engagement with the young person and safety planning. For some young people, this has supported the management and reduction of risk.

Care leavers in custody receive a variable level of support. The timescales for visits are not always in line with the service's own practice guidelines. PAs often encounter difficulties setting up visits, which may impact on sustaining their relationship with young people and effectively planning for support on release. Supervision and managers' oversight appropriately RAG rate the needs of care leavers in custody as high risk, although the guidance provided to PAs is not always effective in driving planning in order to overcome engagement obstacles.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers are well supported with their asylum claims and in their cultural and religious needs. In the summer months of this year of ethnically motivated rioting, the service went to additional lengths to consider the safety needs of asylum-seeking children and young people. For some young people, there can be a gap in the timely availability of English for speakers of other languages courses, leaving them without recourse to education and opportunities to learn English.

Young people who have children are extremely well supported in their role as parents. PAs work closely with their social care colleagues when care leavers have children who are subject to child protection or child-in-need plans. Young people who are unable to care for their children receive sensitive and empathic support and intervention from their PAs to help them navigate the complexities of care proceedings.

A bespoke, well-resourced hub offers a central point in the main town centre for young people to gather, with a range of activities, such as cookery classes, budgeting workshops, drop-ins, Sunday lunch and Care Leaver forums. The committed work of the participation and engagement team has resulted in vibrant and active children in care and care leaver forums. Children and young people are encouraged to take part in an extensive range of participation and engagement

opportunities. There are numerous examples of how children's and young people's voices have influenced and shaped service delivery. Consequently, the young people with whom inspectors met said they feel valued and empowered in knowing they can make a difference. Young people said 'our PAs are literally our corporate parents'.

PAs report that they like working for South Tyneside and that morale is good. PAs told inspectors that it was the culture and the value placed on young people that made the difference for care leavers in South Tyneside.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Jan Edwards
His Majesty's Inspector