

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
Textphone 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/ofsted



31 October 2024

Charisse Monero
Executive Director of Children's Services
Municipal Offices
Bowling Green Road
Kettering
NN15 7QX

Dear Ms Monero

Focused visit to North Northamptonshire children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to North Northamptonshire children's services on 1 and 2 October 2024. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Jenny-ellen Scotland and Russel Breyer.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for care leavers aged 18 to 25. This visit focused specifically on:

- Preparation and support into adulthood.
- Keeping in touch.
- The local offer for care leavers.
- Support for former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

Throughout this letter, care leavers are referred to as care-experienced young people because this is the preferred term in the local authority.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. A range of evidence was considered, including electronic records, performance management information, case file audits and other information provided by senior leaders. In addition, inspectors spoke to care-experienced young people, personal advisers (PAs), a social worker, mental health practitioner, and managers and senior leaders in Northamptonshire Children's Trust (NCT) and North Northamptonshire Council.

Headline findings

Children's social care and targeted early help services in North Northamptonshire are delivered by Northamptonshire Children's Trust. The trust also delivers these services in West Northamptonshire.

Since the previous inspection in October 2022, when the experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers were judged to be requires improvement to be good, services for care-experienced young people in North Northamptonshire have substantially

improved. The improvements are resulting in care-experienced young people being fully supported to make the transition to adulthood safely and at their own pace. Senior leaders have facilitated a range of developments, including a care-leaving hub that accommodates the four care leaving teams, a drop-in duty service (face to face and phone calls) and a range of well-attended activities and groups.

Corporate parenting arrangements have been strengthened, with priorities clearly being informed by the views of children in care and care-experienced young people.

Care-experienced young people have the opportunity to form lasting relationships with their PAs long before they reach adulthood. Young people described their PAs as helpful, caring and responsive.

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

- Housing provision for care-experienced young people.
- Ease of access to hub-type services for all care-experienced young people.

Main findings

PAs start working with care-experienced young people well in advance of their 18th birthday. Transitions to the leaving care teams are well managed and include joint supervisions with the social worker and PA. This, alongside the stable workforce, has resulted in most care-experienced young people forming meaningful relationships with their PAs that last years. When they need and agree to this, care-experienced young people are supported to receive a service beyond the age of 21.

During this visit, a small number of young people were identified as having closed to the service when further work with them was still required or should have been offered, or when it was not clear that they had declined a service. These young people have now been reviewed and plans are in place to close any identified gaps. Processes are also in place to prevent this occurring again.

Staff at all levels are ambitious for care-experienced young people and advocate strongly for them. Care-experienced young people's achievements are regularly celebrated at events and through individual recognition from senior leaders and the corporate parenting board.

Care-experienced young people's pathway plans are carefully crafted together with the young person, where their wishes and feelings are clearly recorded and add value to the plan. They are written directly to the young person, with their achievements and goals recognised and praised. Support is provided according to need, resulting in most young people making good progress towards independence, with many successfully managing their own tenancies. PAs ensure that pathway plans carefully consider previous traumatic experiences and include details on how the young person can access support for their emotional well-being and mental health.

Risks to young people are carefully considered and young people are supported to be aware of their own safety. Young people at risk of exploitation are supported by a worker from the newly formed multi-agency exploitation hub, with a focus on reducing both sexual and criminal exploitation. While most pathway plans are updated every six months, they are not always updated when significant changes occur for the young person, meaning that plans do not always stay relevant to need.

Care-experienced young people benefit from access to the mental health practitioner, a role that is now permanent. Young people benefit through the direct work they receive from the practitioner and the advice and consultation provided to their PA, which informs their support plans.

The local offer is clear and accessible. Care-experienced young people have contributed to the development of the offer and generally understand what support is available to them. Leaders are working to continually enhance the offer.

Care-experienced young people are supported and encouraged by their PAs to access education, employment or training. The care leaving service employs care-experienced young people. As well as being a positive experience for those recruited, this has enhanced knowledge and understanding within the service. The trust and council are ambitious and determined in their plans to extend job opportunities for care-experienced young people throughout the council and with local businesses.

Most care-experienced young people live in safe accommodation, with a good proportion 'staying put' with their foster carers or in specially commissioned supported accommodation and training flats that support their transition to independence. Robust measures are in place to review and quality assure these arrangements. Young people confirmed to inspectors that they feel safe in their accommodation and they are sufficiently prepared for independence.

Securing permanent housing for care-experienced young people is hampered by the poor communication and relations between the housing department and leaving care service. Most care-experienced young people aged 18 to 20 have priority housing status. However, once they reach 21, they lose any priority housing rights, meaning they may have to wait years before being allocated a home. This is a disadvantage to those returning to the area after studying and for those more vulnerable care leavers who need more time to develop the independence skills required to maintain a tenancy. Too much responsibility is sometimes placed on young people to be more proactive in bidding for properties or to make their own case around vulnerability and need to housing officers. When supporting young people through the appeals process, PAs are spending an inordinate amount of time preparing reports, which is taking them away from working directly with young people.

Former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are supported by experienced PAs to go through the asylum application process. PAs have an understanding of the young people's experiences and the support they need. While these young people are encouraged and supported to engage in education, there is an expectation that they successfully complete level 3 of an ESOL course before they can access any vocational training. For those who

struggle to learn in formal settings, if they drop out of these lessons there are no other options available to them. This is impacting on their future employment options should they remain in the UK and limits their opportunity to learn skills that would be beneficial should they return to their home country.

Care-experienced young people who are parents or expecting a baby are supported practically, financially and emotionally to prepare for caring for their children. This includes supporting them to attend appointments and facilitating parenting courses.

The care leaver hub based in Northampton offers a highly valued range of services. Young people told inspectors that the hub has provided them with a space where they can make friends and share experiences. It has helped them to manage their feelings of loneliness and they describe the hub as 'my family'. However, some young people have long journeys to get there, often two or more buses, which may deter them from attending. In response to feedback from young people, leaders have secured funding to open a hub in Kettering, with plans for it to be operational within 12 months. In the meantime, leaders have agreed to provide a bus pass for those young people who travel to the hub.

Additional projects that have had a positive impact include the Staying Close Project, that provides additional and intensive support for those care-experienced young people who have lived in children's homes, and the Wave Project, that has evolved from a project initially for young women to also support young men. Corporate leaders and elected members have made leaving care a protected characteristic. NCT has signed up to the Care Leaver's Covenant, with the council due to sign imminently.

PAs feel supported by their managers, who they find accessible and approachable. While PAs receive regular supervision, the records do not reflect a trauma-informed discussion. PAs know who senior managers are and can approach them if needed. The workplace culture is collaborative and supportive.

A commitment to improvement and innovation has allowed practice with care-experienced young people to develop and flourish. The PAs know their young people well. They speak with passion and pride about their achievements, and go above and beyond to ensure their support needs are met. Young people told inspectors that they feel cared for and valued by leaders who listen to them and make meaningful change according to what they tell them.

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

Yours sincerely

Jenny-ellen Scotland
His Majesty's Inspector