

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

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



30 November 2021

James Stroyan
Group director of people
Town Hall
Feehams
Darlington
DL1 5QT

Dear James

Focused visit to Darlington children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Darlington children's services on 26 and 27 October 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Vicky Metheringham and Louise Walker.

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. However, the delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. The lead inspector and the director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19. 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 advisors, social workers, managers and leaders.

Headline findings

Highly skilled and effective workers in the leaving care team support care leavers extremely well. Workers are led by a knowledgeable and determined team manager who provides consistently good support and supervision. Young people are benefiting from long-standing, trusting relationships with workers who are emotionally invested in them. Workers provide agile and tailored support which is adapted to care leavers' individual circumstances. This relational approach is underpinned by very strong corporate parenting support, influence and investment. A comprehensive local offer, combined with a plethora of creative and generous opportunities from the wider council and its partners, is contributing to positive outcomes for care leavers.

Main findings

COVID-19 rates in Darlington have been consistently above the national average. The local authority was quick to recognise the impact that lockdown restrictions could have for their care leavers. The local authority responded well to reduce

isolation and increase support to them, providing care leavers with additional support where this was required. Despite the pandemic, continued investment and ambitious developments have been made to improve care leavers' experiences. Workers use a variety of communication methods to maintain frequent engagement with care leavers, but face-to-face visiting has been maintained. Staff have been very well supported, both emotionally and practically. Managers and leaders have been available for them throughout the pandemic, either in person or virtually.

The allocation of a personal advisor to young people at aged 15 years and 6 months is resulting in meaningful relationships being developed before young people leave care. Careful consideration by the manager in identifying which worker will support young people, augmented with early allocation to a personal advisor, means that workers have a very good understanding of the young person's experiences before they take full case responsibility.

Workers know their young people exceptionally well. Care leavers experience enduring relationships with their workers because the workforce is stable and long-standing. Workers are persistent in keeping in touch with their young people and visit them frequently. Direct, regular visits are maintained with care leavers even when they live some distance away. Care leavers benefit from a drop-in service so that they can see their workers regularly.

Assessments in pathway plans are consistently of a very good standard and are extremely comprehensive. Culturally sensitive direct work is undertaken, and interpreters are used when this is necessary. Pathway plans are timely and reviewed when required. Care leavers are directly involved in developing their pathway plans, which address their needs well. Pathway plans are written for care leavers and capture their aspirations for the future. The consistent use of scaling means that care leavers' views are sought as to how well they are doing, and meaningful actions are developed to support the young person to the next stage of their lives. Pathway plans consistently consider care leavers' contingency plans. Young people have access to all the key documents that they need as they begin their lives as young adults.

Young people are extremely well prepared to leave care and only make this transition when they are ready. Transitions are well informed by a robust assessment of their needs, and a high-quality support plan is provided for them when they move into independent living. The imaginative use of temporary taster flat provision informs planning, and means that care leavers are very involved in developing their transitional arrangements and learning to live independently with strong support. Workers undertake detailed and timely work with young people and their carers to ensure that they are adequately prepared.

Very few young people leave care before they are 18. When they do, young people are very well supported and have detailed pathway plans. These plans identify how their emotional well-being needs are being met, and workers provide practical support to them in respect of their accommodation. A number of care leavers live in

staying put arrangements with very skilled foster carers. When young people do leave care, many of them return to their foster placement for ongoing support and to celebrate special occasions.

Care leavers live in a range of good-quality accommodation provision. The local authority has secured a variety of accommodation options for young people, helped by its mature partnerships. This means that care leavers benefit from individualised, tailored and very robust packages of support in accommodation that is appropriate for them.

Most care leavers are engaged in education, employment and training (EET) and, despite the pandemic, the numbers in EET continue to improve. A number of care leavers attend university, with more being prepared this year.

Early planning for young people's future is considered at their personal education plan meetings. Local schools are encouraged to work alongside the local authority to remain aspirational for care leavers when considering options. Collaborative work with the virtual school head ensures that care leavers are supported in education with aspirations to attend university. Care leavers benefit from a range of ambitious opportunities such as weekly job clubs, local training providers which provide training courses, clothing for interviews, and relentless support from their workers preparing them for work or for training.

Care leavers are supported to access specialist services when a need is identified. The use of health passports means that care leavers understand their health histories. The leaving care team is working closely with health colleagues to embed the use of health passports more consistently as care leavers become eligible for leaving care support. Care leavers and workers benefit from the psychological therapist support that is available within the service. During the pandemic, the numbers of care leavers requiring access to this provision increased. This additional specialist support is providing care leavers with an understanding about mental health, helping them to identify any triggers so that early support can be secured.

Despite the very strong relationships workers have with care leavers, this does not prevent them from identifying, through their assessments, emerging risk. Workers proactively seek out supervision and management oversight in a timely way. This ensures that appropriate actions are agreed, determining what needs to happen.

Feedback from care leavers is routinely sought. They attend leaving care events, corporate parenting panels and several other forums where they are supported to share their views and feedback, which informs the local authority service delivery. Care leavers are consulted with and listened to by their workers, senior managers and by wider audiences. They are provided with an advocacy service through NYAS, the commissioned service.

Care leavers' achievements are regularly applauded, and events take place to celebrate with them. They also benefit from an abundance of activities, organised

and facilitated by their enthusiastic workers, which give them the opportunity to meet other young people. They communicate to their workers just how much they value these opportunities.

As corporate parents, the local authority shows determination and aspiration to ensure that care leavers' outcomes are improving. Corporate parenting has become everybody's responsibility. Ambitious political leadership means that care leavers are benefiting from a commitment from partners, the wider council and local business opportunities. Politicians challenge the local authority and hold them to account. Leaders are rightly proud of the service for care leavers and are determined to improve their outcomes even further.

The quality assurance framework has been revised and there has been significant investment in this part of the service to create additional capacity. Performance data for care leavers demonstrates that care leavers' outcomes in relation to education, employment and training, suitability of accommodation, and keeping in touch is consistently very strong. This data is scrutinised and challenged through the corporate parenting panel. Leaders are not complacent, and they are determined to continue to improve their performance so that they know that their care leavers are achieving in all areas. Councillors have sight of performance data and use this to drive the local authority to making improvements. The portfolio lead has regular contact with care leavers and with the leaving care team and its workers. They are very proud of the leaving care service and of the care leavers.

Staff have been well supported and feel valued by senior leaders during COVID-19. They experience consistent support from the management team, both emotionally and practically. Staff safety has been a priority and there is a very positive culture. There has been regular communication with staff, who have felt connected as a result. They describe their caseloads as being manageable. This contributes to them being able to support care leavers very well.

Staff experience regular personal and case supervision, which offers reflection and provides them with clear direction. Staff are very positive about the training offer that is available to them. These opportunities have continued to be facilitated during the pandemic. This learning 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