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Dear Mr Pearce

Focused visit to Durham County Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Durham County Council children's services on 14 and 15 November 2023. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Ceri Evans and Lisa Walsh.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for care-experienced young people, specifically the quality of preparation for adulthood, the quality and suitability of accommodation and care leavers with specific needs. The impact of leaders on practice was also considered as part of this visit.

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-experienced young people's records, and undertook case discussions with personal assistants, social workers and managers. Inspectors spoke with a number of care-experienced young people. Inspectors also reviewed relevant local authority performance and quality assurance information.

Headline findings

This is the first focused visit since the last inspection in May 2022, when children's services were judged to be good overall. Leaders have a detailed understanding of the strengths of this area of service and where further improvements can be made. Senior leaders have further developed and improved services for care-experienced young people. This includes the local offer to care-experienced young people and establishing a specialist service for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. A second care leavers hub has opened which is offering a greater range of support and activities for care-experienced young people across the county.

Most care-experienced young people's cases looked at during this visit show that they benefit from long-standing relationships with workers whom they trust. They are prepared well for adulthood and most live in suitable accommodation. Staff feel

well supported and receive regular and reflective supervision, but the records do not reflect the quality of the discussion which staff articulate.

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

- The recording of reflective supervision discussions.

Main findings

Personal advisers (PAs) are introduced and allocated to care-experienced young people well in advance of their 18th birthday. This early involvement of a PA supports the opportunity for effective relationships to develop and helps to ensure that planning for adulthood starts early.

Young people told inspectors that they have strong and caring relationships with PAs whom they trust. Many young people spoken to during the visit view their PAs as extended family members and say that they value the relationships they have with them.

PAs undertake thoughtful and effective work to help young people to develop the necessary skills for independence. This includes a programme of courses at the care leavers hubs on cooking, budgeting, life skills and how to enhance their emotional well-being. Care-experienced young people told inspectors that the support on offer at the care leaving hubs has been instrumental in helping them to develop the skills they need for life and provided them with a space where they can make friends and share experiences.

Most pathway plans are completed alongside care-experienced young people but not all plans are of a consistent quality. While most identify needs and risk and have actions focused on improving outcomes for young people, a small minority did not clearly highlight the young person's current situation and the support they need to meet their goals.

The vast majority of care-experienced young people live in suitable accommodation that supports their transition to independence. This includes remaining with foster carers on 'staying put' arrangements, supported accommodation or gaining their own tenancy. When care-experienced young people are living in unsuitable accommodation, PAs maintain close contact and liaise effectively with other professionals, such as housing, to ensure that the young person's circumstances improve promptly.

Support to care-experienced young people who are at university is a key strength. Currently, 36 care-experienced young people are attending university and five have successfully graduated this year. Inspectors spoke with a group of these young people, who spoke openly about the excellent support they received from their PAs.

This support was described as a 'lifeline' for some, especially during the initial transition to a new environment.

When care-experienced young people become parents, there is a wide range of support available for them. PAs are quick to respond to young parents with effective practical and emotional support which enables many young people to parent their child successfully.

Most care-experienced young people in custody have regular contact with their PAs through visiting and video calls. Most benefit from strong and long-lasting relationships with their PAs and as such they continue to feel well supported. However, for a small minority of care-experienced young people in custody, the support was less evident. In these instances, infrequent contact has left a small minority of care-experienced young people without the support they require for a successful transition back to the community.

There is an increasing number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people who are care leavers in Durham. In order to provide a more effective response for these young people, leaders have established a specialist service with workers who have a comprehensive understanding of unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers, and the challenges they face. PAs work hard to ensure that this group of young people are fully aware of their legal rights. Visits are regular, and matters relating to their culture and identity are well understood and responded to appropriately.

PAs are aspirational for their care-experienced young people and celebrate their successes. They spoke about sticking with them through challenging times, being dependable and reliable. Clearly, for those care-experienced young people that inspectors saw during the visit this approach is helping them to achieve positive outcomes.

PAs take great pride in what they do and morale among the team is high. Those spoken to described a highly supportive environment. While reflective supervision takes place regularly, not all supervision records show how managers are providing workers with professional challenge to progress plans.

PAs benefit from a wide-ranging programme of continuous professional development. PAs presented as well informed and confident, and this is having a positive impact on the service they provide to care-experienced young people.

Political and senior leaders have a detailed oversight of practice within the care leaving service. The local authority's quality assurance framework provides leaders with a thorough overview of practice and the impact of services and interventions. Audits are used effectively to further enhance practice.

The local authority's offer to care-experienced young people is clear and accessible. Care-experienced young people contributed to the development of the offer and fully

understand what support is available to them. Leaders have a commitment to revisiting the offer regularly to ensure that all care leavers have access to the support they need regardless of their personal circumstances.

As a corporate parent, the local authority is diligent in its efforts to ensure that care-experienced young people are given the opportunity to achieve their goals and they are ambitious for their futures. The corporate parenting strategy has been developed in collaboration with care-experienced young people. This collaboration is meaningful, and the voice of care-experienced young people is central to decision-making.

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

Yours sincerely

Ceri Evans
His Majesty's Inspector