

TITLE OF REPORT: Ofsted Focussed Visit - Care Leavers

REPORT OF: Caroline O'Neill, Strategic Director, Care Wellbeing and Learning

Executive Summary

1. The purpose of this report is to provide information on the outcome of the focussed visit carried out by Ofsted as part of the new ILAC (Inspections of Local Authority Children's Services).

Background

2. In January 2018 Ofsted published a new inspection framework and guidance for inspecting local authority services for children in need of help and protection, children in care and care leavers. The new framework judges the effectiveness of local authority services and arrangements:
 - To help and protect children
 - The experiences and progress of children in care wherever they live, including those who return home
 - The arrangements for permanence for children who are looked after, including adoption
 - The experience and progress of care leavers

Focused visits

3. Focused visits evaluate an aspect of service, a theme or the experiences of a cohort of children.
4. Inspectors will not make graded judgements (inadequate, requires improvement, good or outstanding). Nor will they indicate what the grade may have been if the visit had been a short or standard inspection. The outcome will be findings about strengths and areas for improvement, reported in a letter.
5. Where inspectors find serious weaknesses, they will identify areas for priority action. An area for priority action is either:
 - An area of serious weakness that is placing children at risk of inadequate protection and significant harm.

Or

- Unnecessary delay in identifying permanent solutions for children in care that results in their welfare not being safeguarded and promoted.
6. Inspectors will use findings from focused visits when planning their next short or standard inspection, the evidence from a focused visit will not be used as primary evidence, but may enable inspectors to target their evidence gathering more effectively.
 7. Ofsted undertook a focused visit of Gateshead's Children's Services on 20 and 21 March 2018, to evaluate the Council's arrangements for care leavers. The inspectors considered a range of evidence, including discussions with care leavers, social workers, personal advisers and senior managers. They also looked at performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

Summary of the Ofsted visit

8. The inspectors noted the Council and senior leaders have embraced the role of corporate parents "taking determined steps to raise the ambition of care leavers". They acknowledged 'the Local Authority's commitment to continuous improvement of the service is clear but the strategic ambition is not fully realised in all aspects of operational practice.'
9. The inspectors highlighted "two significant areas where the Council has developed very strong practice improving outcomes for young people", i.e. access to an impressive range of creative initiatives to support the young person in education, employment and training, and the accommodation offer which provide flexible and bespoke housing options.
10. It was noted that children who leave care in Gateshead benefit from the support of a dedicated group of personal advisers who "have the skills to develop trusting relationships to facilitate effective direct work". However, the pathway planning and plans seen by Ofsted and written by personal advisers were considered to be poor in quality and Ofsted also reported that there needed to be better engagement with the young people in developing and reviewing their own plans.
11. The Ofsted inspectors were also critical of management processes and oversight: "Management processes to support effective casework need to be strengthened. A lack of critical challenge provided through management oversight means that staff's supervision is not providing sufficient rigour to drive aspirational plans."
12. Ofsted identified the following areas for improvement:
 - Most pathway plans written by personal advisers could be better. Plans need to be strengthened to be outcome focused, evidence that the young person is an active participant, better consider diverse needs and identity, and to have a meaningful contingency if things go wrong.
 - The quality of case management oversight of pathway planning, written plans, and reviewing processes needs to be improved. Managers should ensure that supervision supports personal advisers to maintain a focus on being appropriately ambitious for young people.

- Auditing practice in the care leaver's service needs to be strengthened as a tool for monitoring quality of practice, rather than compliance and to feed into service development and forward planning.

13. It is disappointing that the outcome of the Ofsted focused visit in March 2018 reflected similar findings to the 2015 inspection in relation to the young people's pathway plans but an action plan has been developed to address the areas for improvement with 7 key areas of work:

- Improve the quality of pathway plans to ensure they are outcome focussed, have smart targets and evidence the young person is an active participant in the pathway planning and review process to ensure they focus on the most important issues for young people and care leave.
- Develop a comprehensive auditing and reporting programme to ensure robust scrutiny and monitoring of the care leavers service.
- Improve evidence of management oversight on all young people's case files, including levels of supervision of personal advisors to ensure planning is appropriately personalised and sufficiently ambitious.
- Ensuring health passports are shared and understood by young people.
- Strengthen the offer and timeliness of emotional wellbeing support for care leavers.
- Strengthen the engagement work with young people and ensure the voice of young people is clearly evidenced in their casefiles.
- Establish a Quality Improvement Group to drive improvement and rapidly address areas of improvement identified by Ofsted

14. The action plan has been implemented and progress has been made in relation to:

- Training has taken place with all social workers and personal advisors about writing outcome focussed plans
- One to one meetings have taken place with the personal advisors and the team manager to scrutinise pathway plans, identifying areas where improvement is required
- New audit tool has been developed which focusses on the needs of the young person, outcomes for the young person and the voice of the young person. These were implemented in May 2018
- Themes for practice and development will be identified from audits
- Good practice workshops have been developed been booked in for all staff to ensure they understand the importance of pathway plans, pathway plan reviews and the need to involve young people in this process

- Supervision is systematically being recorded and audited by managers to ensure there is critical challenge and reflective practice
- IRO's and foster carers will ensure young people understand the purpose of their health passports
- Quality improvement group has been established and meetings planned on a monthly basis

15. Progress will continue to be monitored by the Quality Improvement Board and the Corporate Parenting Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Recommendations:

16. It is recommended that the Overview Scrutiny Committee:

- Notes the outcome of the Ofsted visit March 2018 and considers the implications for Gateshead Council.
- Considers how the implementation of the action plan can be monitored by OSC.

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