

16 November 2018

Dear Helen

## **CHILDREN'S SERVICES PEER CHALLENGE: MIDDLESBROUGH, 12-14 NOVEMBER 2018**

Thank you for taking part in the Children's Services Peer Challenge activity in the North East region.

You asked us to look at your work in relation to Care Leavers and, more specifically:

- The council's strategic approach to care leavers particularly around the commissioning of services and its role as a Corporate Parent
- The support provided to care leavers who are not in employment, education and training
- Participation of care leavers in service development and the voice of the young person
- Role of partners in supporting care leavers
- Pathway planning and links with Personal Education Plans
- Quality of practice, in particular around challenging cases and evidencing improved outcomes.

Your preparatory work for this peer challenge was helpful in enabling the peer challenge team to focus its activity appropriately. The team received a warm welcome and good co-operation and support throughout the process. It was evident to us all that all those we met were interested in learning and continued development.

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. A team of peers used their experience to reflect on the evidence you presented through documentation, conversation and observation. We hope their conclusions, captured in our final presentation to you and in this letter will assist you in your on-going improvement.

### **1. Background**

The Peer Challenge process now adopted in the North East, builds on the peer review model that was developed by the Local Government Association (LGA).

In order to support the Peer Challenge process all Local Authorities have nominated key members from their senior leadership teams including their Director of Children's Services (DCS) to be trained in the Peer Challenge process and to lead Peer Challenges. Peer challengers have either undertaken regional training or are LGA accredited peer reviewers

### **2. Process**

The Peer Challenge in Middlesbrough was provided by a team led by Barbara Shaw, Corporate Director of Children and Families, Redcar and Cleveland Council, Jane Young, Assistant Director, Children's Services, Hartlepool Borough Council, Tracey Hopps, Team Manager, Leaving Care Service, North Tyneside Council and Rebecca Eden, Senior Manager, Children's Services, North Tyneside Council. The process was managed and coordinated by Jill Emery, Director, Impact Change Solutions.

The team spent two days working in the Local Authority collecting evidence with which to frame their findings and then drew together and presented their conclusions on day three of the Challenge. This activity took place on 12-14 November 2018. Prior to the on-site activity, colleagues in Middlesbrough shared a wide range of information with the team to support its preparations and produced a timetable which ensured that the team was able to meet an appropriate range of colleagues and partners.

As well as a desk-based analysis of documentation, the Peer Challenge process included a wide range of on-site activities, with over 50 participants. These activities included meetings, focus groups, case and audit reviews. We met Councillors, partners, foster carers, young people and officers at all levels within children's services.

As a result of this activity we identified over 70 strengths and areas for consideration, which were refined and matched against the scope of the Challenge, as well as a 'headline' strengths and areas for consideration section.

It is important to note that:

- we can only report on what we saw, heard and read – and this was inevitably limited to what it is possible to achieve in a two day period and the number of cases we reviewed was small. We advised you that we were unable to make comment on the links between pathway plans and Personal Education Plans due to the limited number of cases we reviewed.
- much of what we have identified will be familiar to you – and this was confirmed as we made our presentation on 14 November 2018.

### **3. Detailed Findings**

#### **3.1 Headlines**

##### **Headline strengths**

- Staff are committed, passionate and know their young people well.
- There is a collective desire to improve Children's Services at political, managerial and staff level.
- Investment in Children's Services has been prioritized.
- There is evidence of strong partnership working across a range of agencies to support young people leaving care
- The young people we spoke to are positive about their workers and the support they receive.

##### **Headline areas for consideration**

- Develop ways of ensuring that everyone can 'Tell the Story' of care leavers and the service in Middlesbrough. There needs to be a coherent narrative which everyone understands and can articulate.
- Consider the wider implications of change management. There are a plethora of new initiatives being introduced and this is impacting on service improvement.
- Review the performance management arrangements and the impact on quality of practice. There is a focus on compliance and this needs to be balanced with improving practice.
- Maximise the wealth of resources available to improve outcomes for care leavers. Middlesbrough has a strong voluntary and community sector and together with the co-located teams in Pathways there is an opportunity to work together on a range of outcome-focussed initiatives.

- Renew the focus and purpose of pathway plans in line with statutory requirements and best practice.
- Ensure there is clear direction and leadership for the Leaving Care service. The service has been through a difficult few months and will benefit from strong, visible leadership going forward.

## **3.2 Leadership**

### **Strengths**

- There has been increased investment in Children's Services of £1.5m including ambitious plans for a £3m Edge of Care Service.
- A Corporate Improvement Board is overseeing a range of improvement initiatives which is chaired by the Chief Executive giving a strong corporate commitment to Children's Services.
- There is corporate ownership of the wider challenges across Children's Services and this is at both political and management level.
- A strong, well-established relationship between the Pathways and Transition teams is positive and this can be built on to ensure that young people with additional needs are provided with the support they need going into adulthood.

### **Areas for consideration**

- Consider how change is managed and the involvement of, and impact on, staff and young people. There have been a range of changes introduced across Children's Services to make improvements. In order to make the cultural shift needed staff need to feel included in this improvement journey and be involved in the changes needed. Currently there is a perception that change is being imposed on them without the opportunity to be part of the change.
- Ensure that future reviews of services are aligned to the overarching improvement plan for children's services. There have been a number of reviews in a short space of time with little or no time to consolidate the learning and implement the changes. to look at improving the services.
- Review the use of Liquid Logic and exploit its capabilities for better team performance information. Although the system has limitations there are ways of adapting the system to produce meaningful information. Visits to other local authorities who have done this may help.
- Is there the correct balance between compliance and improvement in quality of practice? The performance management regime is intense with performance clinics, challenge clinic and compliance clinics. This may be impacting on the time available to improve quality of practice.
- Is the direction from strategic managers effectively communicated to staff? There are significant changes happening in Children's Services and it is vital that these messages are communicated to staff in the Pathways service so everyone understands their role in the improvement journey.
- Are the current management arrangements for the service robust? The service has had some challenges in recent months and it will be important to ensure that there is resilience, strong leadership and support going forward. This should include valuing staff and celebrating the work they do for young people.

- Consider how there can be more effective joined up commissioning. There has been a tendency to make demand led decisions on an individual basis rather than taking a holistic view of what can be commissioned to the benefit of Looked After Children and care leavers.
- Agree and communicate a joint strategy for supporting care leavers with disabilities. Build on the good relationships that exist between the Pathways and Transitions teams and make some clear decisions on how this group of care leavers are supported.
- Think about IRO challenge and whether there are robust arrangements in place to ensure independence. The current arrangements where the IROs are situated with resources including children's homes and fostering services has the potential to be a conflict of interest.
- Evidence the benefits and impact of co-located partners within the service. The LAC Nurses, CAMHS worker and Work Readiness Practitioner being located within the Pathways team has many benefits but there needs to be a way of articulating the benefits of this arrangement and the impact it has on the lives of care leavers.
- Re-establish Care2Work and the Multi Agency Looked After Partnership (MALAP) to ensure a holistic approach to identified need, and to evidence impact. Both forums have the potential to impact on the number of care leavers who are NEET and improve outcomes for them.
- Ensure service and team plans are owned and embedded. The current 'plans on a page' are a positive but there needs to be more in-depth plans that sit behind them so everyone knows what is expected at a service, team and individual level.

### **3.3. Corporate Parenting**

#### **Strengths**

- Elected members have recognised the need for rapid change and improvement in Children's Services through the commitment of resources
- There is political cross-party ownership of Children in Care and Leaving Care agenda.
- The Corporate Parenting Board has recently refocussed and is reviewing accountability arrangements within the wider democratic structure which is positive and shows a real commitment to improving the lives of looked after children and care leavers.
- Care leavers have attended the Corporate Parenting Board and been able to express their views.

#### **Areas for consideration**

- Consider opportunities for care leavers including ring-fenced apprenticeships. Although there is an offer of a guaranteed interview to care leavers if they complete a traineeship the council could remove this barrier and offer a number of posts for care leavers whether they have completed the traineeship or not.
- Is there a more involved role for Elected Members through visits to homes, foster carers and for those living far from home. This will provide Elected Members with a direct opportunity to discharge their Corporate Parenting responsibility.
- Clarify 'Staying Put' arrangements with foster carers to avoid confusion. There is added confusion with the supported lodgings offer and it would help if foster carers are made aware of what the various offers are and how the Independent Fostering Agencies fit into this.

## 3.4 Practice

### Strengths

- Staff know their young people well and have a good relationship with them. There was evidence of staff going the extra mile, being innovative and creative. This included obtaining a work placement through personal connections and attending a performance a care leaver was involved in.
- There is evidence of the voice and views of young people in case records and Pathway Plans and staff report that they are working on improving recording young people's views.
- Caseloads are at a manageable level, although there has been some increase since cases were transferred from LAC teams. This follows a period where no cases were transferred due to the proposed restructure.
- There is regular supervision for staff to discuss cases.
- The Pathways team understand the need for changes to pathway planning as they are not fit-for-purpose and take too long to complete in their current form.
- There are positive relationships amongst staff who engage in peer reflection of case management.
- There is a stable, committed, experienced, knowledgeable and passionate workforce who are aspirational for their care leavers.

### Areas for consideration

- Review the Pathway plan format with the team. Plans should be based on statutory requirements, highlight progress, areas of action and be relevant. The current plans appear to be similar to a review and are not focussed on looking forward.
- Embed reflective supervision where staff feel supported with managing complex cases and risk. Supervision should recognise effort and achievement. Although supervision is happening there is limited evidence of reflection and the recognition of good work.
- Ensure appraisals are more meaningful and linked to professional development. Appraisals seen by the team showed a lot of preparation by the worker but limited input from management. Objectives were not always clear and there was limited focus on training and development.
- Consider preparations for transition in foster care placements. Foster carers expressed difficulty when a care leaver reached 16 and 18 and the way foster carers were seen. This included where the Personal Adviser spoke to the care leaver and not the foster carers, house rules no longer being relevant as the care leaver was 18 and the range of transition issues that present moving to adulthood.
- Ensure chronologies are up to date and meaningful. There was limited evidence of good chronologies on the case files the team reviewed although the team did not have access to the supplementary recording system where such information may be retained
- Record the individualised support for young people. Personal Advisers provide a range of opportunities for young people that are not captured on their record. This includes visits to Alton Towers and other social events. Young people who want to access their records would benefit from seeing some of the activities they participated in.
- Discourage the use of 'cut and paste' on case files. There were a number of cases where it was clear that information had been included in the case files from other records. One

example being 'he' when it should have been 'she' which had been copied between case notes and plans

- Review the use of language on case files. There was an example where if a young person access their records they would see a derogatory comment about one of their parents It was explained that this had been copied from older records when such terms were more commonly used.
- Adopt a professional approach to elements of the service around record keeping e.g. workload management meetings, team meetings, staff work plans and supervision. Supervision records are hand-written at a number of levels and were often difficult to read. Team meetings were recorded in a book with no actions assigned.
- Re-establish the needs-led approach to case transfers to consider when and how cases are best transferred between LAC and Pathways and doing this in a planned manner.
- Invigorate the focus on life story work and supporting young people to understand their journey.

### **3.5 Care Leavers Participation**

#### **Strengths**

- Some young people appreciated the opportunity to readily access support and engage in positive activities in the Pathways building.
- The Children in Care Council was involved in the development of the Local Offer.
- There are seven care leavers active in the Children in Care Council. There are plans in place to increase the number of Children in Care Council (CiCC) groups to include younger age groups. The current CiCC is comprised only of care leavers. This may be because there has not been a participation officer in post for four years prior to the post being filled.
- The council has commissioned the Bright Spots programme from Coram Voice and the University of Bristol to capture the views of looked after children and care leavers. The response rates have been good and the findings will be announced at a conference in January 2019.

#### **Areas for consideration**

- Consider how the views of young people inform multi-agency service planning. This will assist partners in developing services that have been co-produced with young people.
- Ensure regular and wider consultation with children and young people (not just CiCC) before implementation of plans. The number of care leavers involved in the Children in Care Council are small and there needs to be ways of consulting with the wider group of care leavers to ensure that a much wider representation of views is achieved.
- Consider inviting the Participation Officer to Pathway team meetings. This will provide a valuable two-way flow of information and ideas.

### **3.6 Support for Care Leavers**

#### **Strengths**

- Care Leavers spoke highly of their workers - 'They're doing a good job, keep going and keep focussed on things like housing'.
- The Local Offer is well presented.

- The courses available to address health and wellbeing are well received by young people.
- The provision of Crash pads for young people at times of greatest need are seen positively by partners.
- There are committed, enthusiastic and young people focussed housing providers in Middlesbrough.
- The Virtual School knows the issues and challenges and has a clear plan to respond around a range of provision for alternative learning and improving the number of care leavers in education, employment and training.
- There are more young people at university than ever before, currently 14, and this is a cause for celebration.
- There is dedicated support for EET/NEET which are all based at Pathways delivering a one-stop shop for care leavers.

### **Areas for consideration**

- Ensure that young people are listened to and supported in choices around employment and training. Young people feel that there is a focus on training rather than employment. For some young people who want to gain employment for a variety of reasons, there should be a recognition that there are alternatives to training and be supported in seeking employment.
- Is the building welcoming for young people? – Young people would like more comfortable seating, different décor and that ‘It could be more homely’
- Communicate the local offer to all young people. There is a lack of knowledge of the local offer amongst young people. Those involved in the CiCC knew about the Local Offer but the wider population of care leavers did not.
- Is there clarity around entitlements? Although the entitlement is standard there was a perception that some people received more than others. Communication around what the entitlement is and how it can be used would be helpful for young people to understand the differences.
- Develop a programme to assist young people’s readiness for adulthood. There are limited opportunities for young people to learn about the life skills needed in adulthood.
- Review how mental health support can be improved. CAMHS do provide a service but young people often have a range of mental health issues that require an individualised approach and that a ‘one size fits all’ approach is not always appropriate e.g. use of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

### **3.7 Role of Partners**

#### **Strengths**

- CAMHS provides support to young people and foster carers on a range of issues and meet regularly with Social Workers and Personal Advisers and this is appreciated.
- There has been targeted work by LAC nurses to provide a range of courses around health e.g. Fresh Start, Why Risk It?
- Partners and other agencies have been invited to team meetings to provide updates and this was valued by staff.

- The Educational Intervention Unit for alternative provision is a good model of practice and delivery.
- The Virtual School is identifying and driving improvements to meet the priority of reducing NEET in care leavers.
- There is good joint working with partners e.g. Princes Trust to support young people

#### **Areas for consideration**

- Harness the enthusiasm and commitment of partners to have a more forward- looking commissioning strategy. This is particularly around accommodation provision for care leavers and other young people who may present with additional needs or challenging behaviour.
- Consider re-establishing the panel of partners to explore ‘best package’ of support to meet complex needs. This was seen by partners as a good way of addressing need using a holistic approach.
- Is there a gap in the general sexual health offer? Is there a correlation between this and the rise in teenage pregnancies?
- Involve key services and partners in a shared strategic vision to reduce the number of young people who are NEET.

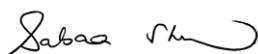
#### **4. Next Steps**

You and your colleagues will now want to consider how you incorporate the team’s findings into your improvement plans. We hope that you find our reflections helpful.

It is important that this letter describes accurately what we have observed and analysed and that it provides you with an appropriate summary to facilitate change. If this letter contains any factual inaccuracies or you have any concerns or comments about the analysis or recommendations please do not hesitate to contact me and amendments will be made as appropriate.

Once again, thank you for agreeing to receive a Peer Challenge and to everyone involved for their participation. As a team we gained from the experience and we hope that will also be the case for your local authority.

Yours sincerely



Barbara Shaw

Lead for Peer Challenge in Middlesbrough