

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

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



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Sue Cook
Executive Director of People Services
Suffolk County Council
Endeavour House
Russell Road
Ipswich
IP1 2BX

Dear Ms Cook

Focused visit to Suffolk County Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Suffolk County Council children's services on 25 and 26 January 2022. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Russel Breyer and Lorna Schlechte.

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. It was undertaken by inspectors on site.

Headline findings

Care leavers are a high priority for the local authority. This is evident at all levels. The priority given to care leavers by leaders drives the effective practice evidenced by the workforce, and creates and sustains a culture that is determined, ambitious and creative. Care leavers are helped to successfully transition to independence and to reach their potential.

Practitioners build trusting relationships with care leavers. They access a wide range of specialist expertise which they use well to provide services to care leavers that are individualised and responsive. Many care leavers achieve well, exceeding their own expectations. All are valued and their achievements are celebrated. Persistent efforts are made to reach out to those who are difficult to engage.

Leaders were quick to recognise, understand and respond to the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic presented to young people. They swiftly made arrangements for a range of practical and emotional support which helped young people. The learning from the experience has been captured and used to improve services.

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

- Support for the emotional well-being and mental health of care leavers at all levels of need.

Main findings

Children in care are supported by a social worker in the leaving care service from the age of 16 until a personal adviser (PA) takes over when they reach 18. The structure of the service and culture of practice means that PAs and the care leaver get to know each other before handover. This makes the transition an easier experience for young people and gives them a good start on their journey to independence.

Workers know their children and young people well. This enables them to provide support which is individual to the child or young person. When needs change, the response is timely. Pathway plans are clear and comprehensive, and are reviewed effectively.

Workers make significant efforts to keep in touch with care leavers, and are persistent in continuing to offer a service when young people are not engaged. The door is kept open to those who may want support in future. Young people find workers easily contactable and responsive, and that they do what they say they are going to do. Some young people said that workers had helped them to turn their lives around. If the relationship between a care leaver and their PA does not work out, managers respond swiftly so that young people are still supported.

Social workers and PAs support children and young people to maintain relationships with those who are important to them.

Social workers and PAs access a range of services to deliver help to children and young people. Workers with specialist expertise help with challenging issues, ensuring that progress is made in key areas. Examples include the Staying Close team, a specialist housing support worker, post-16 and post-18 education support workers, and the Make A Change team. Workers are able to access support quickly and easily, so that there is no delay in getting the young person the help they need.

There is a gap in emotional well-being and mental health provision. The Emotional Well-being Hub method of attempting to contact young people by phone or text means that some young people who may have a significant need are not reached and do not receive a service. If, following triage, a young person does not meet the criteria for a specialist service, they may still have considerable needs for which there is no suitable support. Waiting times for some specialist mental health services mean that young people do not always receive timely support. Senior leaders are engaged with partners in a transformation programme to better meet these needs.

PAs, supported by a specialist housing officer, are persistent in trying to find the best accommodation options for young people. Most care leavers are in suitable accommodation. When a care leaver is placed in accommodation that does not meet this standard, urgent and determined efforts are made to source suitable accommodation. PAs work with providers to identify any problems in a tenancy at an early stage and to provide support. The Staying Close team provides specialist support when eviction is a risk. Choice of accommodation is limited, which means that young people sometimes have to accept accommodation that they are not happy with. Senior leaders are working with partners, including district and borough councils, to develop the accommodation offer.

Workers encourage care leavers to develop good health awareness and to make healthy choices. They support young people to attend health assessments and appointments, and work well with health professionals to achieve this.

'Staying put' arrangements are used effectively and flexibly to support young people who wish to remain with their foster carers. Currently, 50 care leavers are supported in this way, a high proportion of the total. This provides them with continuity, stability and the support they feel they need.

The culture of the leaving care service is ambitious. Workers help young people to reach their potential. Great pride is taken in young people who go to university, with similar efforts and pride for all levels of achievement. A small number of young people have achieved employment via an innovative apprenticeship programme. Leaders are ambitious to develop more apprenticeship opportunities with a wider range of partners over time.

Workers are aware of the risks that children and young people may be vulnerable to and hold these in mind. They are quick to respond to emerging risks, and are determined and creative in addressing existing risks. The Make a Change team supports children and young people at risk of, or experiencing, exploitation. Young people are helped to keep themselves safe and to make positive changes.

Care leavers with disabilities are supported by a team that works with children and young people from 0-25 years, so benefit from not moving between teams at transition points. For those young people with a lifelong need for support, joint planning with adult social care takes place via a transitions panel. Young people are enabled to live as independently as possible. Families are fully involved in planning. Deprivation of liberty arrangements are used when necessary to keep young people safe.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive support from a dedicated team of social workers and PAs who meet them quickly on arrival in the UK and provide them with clothes, money and accommodation. The team then works with persistence and determination to build up trust. They are sensitive to past traumatic events that children and young people may have experienced, and aware of their potential need for mental health support. The team promotes links to cultural and religious activities

to reduce isolation and promote well-being. They also work effectively with the modern slavery unit in the police, so that risk of exploitation receives a timely response.

Strong governance arrangements involve elected members and partners at senior levels. These are characterised by commitment, challenge and accountability.

Leaders have developed a strong strategic plan since the last inspection. This is comprehensive and well-co-ordinated across areas of need and partnerships.

Children and young people are involved in, and influence, the development of services. Suffolk's sufficiency strategy is an example of this; the voice of young people is threaded throughout the document. Young people also co-produced the 'Local Offer to Care Leavers', although find it difficult to hold the detail of this in mind and would benefit from other solutions for making this information readily available to them.

Senior leaders know the care leaver cohort well and understand their needs. Comprehensive performance information and audit programmes give a clear line of sight to the quality of practice. There have been positive developments in these systems since the last inspection.

The workforce is stable and well motivated. Staff turnover is low and morale is high. There is a strong team culture in which workers help each other and look after each other. Workers are valued by their managers. Managers at all levels are approachable, responsive and helpful.

Workers are carefully matched to care leavers by managers who understand the child or young person's needs, ensuring that workers' skills and interests are used to best effect.

For some workers, workloads are high, and can temporarily be even higher when there are vacancies in a team. Managers increase support when workloads are particularly high, so that an effective service is maintained. However, affected workers are able to spend less time with children and young people, which limits opportunities to provide emotional and practical support.

Workers receive regular supervision, which is effective in ensuring that work is progressed. When there is not a significant level of contact with a young person, supervision recordings are very brief, so it is not possible to see how workers are supported to think through how the young person might be engaged. Managers make regular and clear entries in case records. The quality of decision-making and the rationale for decisions are visible.

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

Yours sincerely

Russel Breyer
Her Majesty's Inspector