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Mr Alex Hopkins
Director of Children's Services
Civic Centre
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Dear Mr Hopkins,

Monitoring visit of Sunderland City Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Sunderland City Council children's services on 4 and 5 August 2016. The visit was the first monitoring visit since the local authority was judged to be inadequate overall at the inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers, published in July 2015. This monitoring visit was carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectors, Fiona Millns and Rachel Holden.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in respect of the experiences and progress of care leavers.

The visit considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, supervision records, observation of social work practice, performance data and young people's case file audit findings. In addition, we spoke to eight care leavers, and a range of staff, including managers, social workers, advanced practitioners and housing providers.

The local authority is making significant progress to improve services for care leavers.

Summary of findings

- Senior managers within children's services have responded determinedly to the areas of improvement identified in respect of the experiences and progress of care leavers, which were judged to be inadequate at the last inspection.

- Senior managers have a sound understanding of the key priorities for improvement in services for care leavers, demonstrated through a clear, evaluative and accurate self-assessment.
- Workers at all levels within the Next Steps service for care leavers report that they feel more confident and supported by senior managers and that there is a more open and receptive culture of leadership.
- Performance management, including data collection and quality auditing, has improved considerably, providing a more accurate analysis to inform areas for further service improvement and development.
- New policies, procedures, documents and accompanying training are supporting workers to improve the quality of practice and recording.
- Care leavers feel safe and well supported where they are living.
- There is a good range of housing options available, including newly commissioned accommodation and increased use of 'staying put' and supported lodgings.
- The percentage of care leavers with pathway plans in place has increased considerably, from 69% in November 2015 to 89% in June 2016.
- While the number of pathway plans undertaken has improved, the quality of these is not consistently good, especially in consideration of chronologies, assessments of need, analyses of findings and the detail of plans.
- The quality of case recording is not consistently good, lacks detail and does not evidence the work undertaken with care leavers.
- Care leavers are supported by a stable team of social workers and personal advisers in the Next Steps care leavers' service.
- Caseloads for Next Steps workers are manageable, enabling workers to offer support and guidance to care leavers.
- Supervision of social work and personal advisers is undertaken regularly, but recording of supervision is not reflective and does not focus on the quality of practice.
- Management oversight, including challenge from independent reviewing officers, is weak. It is not clearly recorded in young people's records and is not effective in progressing their plans.
- Care leavers are increasingly involved in developing their pathway plans, and their opinions are considered carefully.
- The percentage of care leavers who are now in touch with the Next Steps service has increased from 30% in May 2015 to 82% in June 2016.
- Care leavers are supported well to develop skills for independence.

- Despite care leavers increasingly being supported well, there are significant gaps and delays in care leavers receiving information about their medical histories and being given their health passports.
- Care leavers receive appropriate support to access education and college. However, personal education plans are not consistently provided or updated.
- While there is still room for improvement, the percentage of care leavers not in education, employment and training (NEET) has significantly decreased from 85% in May 2015 to 57% in June 2016. This includes six care leavers now in higher education and eight care leavers accessing apprenticeships.
- Care leavers are consistently provided with information about their rights and entitlements. This includes their being provided with key documents, such as national insurance numbers, birth certificates and passports.
- Care leavers are represented within the change council and have contributed to the commissioning of services through this forum. They act as young inspectors in reviewing the quality of housing provision and in developing a DVD to showcase the range of housing options available.

Evaluation of progress

Based on the evidence gathered during the visit, we identified areas of strength, areas where improvement is being made and some areas where we considered that the progress has not yet met the expectations set out in the local authority's action plan.

The new leadership arrangements for children's services in Sunderland in respect of services for care leavers demonstrate a strong and appropriate focus. Leaders are committed to developing a performance culture at all levels of service delivery. Improvements are clearly seen in the outcomes for care leavers. Improved performance monitoring and quality assurance processes are key factors in securing this improvement. Findings from quality assurance processes are used to shape training and packages of support for staff. The development of practice standards, policies and new frameworks for pathway planning and assessments underpin these developments and support further improvement and consistency of practice.

Workers in the Next Steps service report a change in culture, with clear direction and openness, which is engendering confidence within the staff team. The Next Steps service has been relocated close to the city centre, which enables care leavers to meet their allocated workers more easily and is resulting in better support for them. Improved contact and support for care leavers is further enhanced through increased stability of the workforce, with just one vacancy in the Next Steps team, due to the promotion of one of the workers. Sickness levels across the workforce are low.

Pathway planning has been a priority for the 'Next Steps' service, to ensure that care leavers' needs are identified and action taken to provide support. In November 2015,

only 69% of care leavers had a pathway plan. This had increased to 89% by June 2016. However, as acknowledged by senior managers and identified by inspectors, the quality of pathway plans is not yet good enough. Needs assessments are not always undertaken, chronologies are not used consistently or effectively, plans are not specific with regard to actions required and are not always updated to reflect changes in circumstances. In addition, personal education plans are not always in place or up to date, and the quality of case recording is inconsistent, often lacking sufficient detail.

Supervision and management oversight is not consistently effective in progressing actions or identifying weaknesses in the quality of practice with care leavers. The recording of supervision does not demonstrate reflective practice in casework. Managers, including independent reviewing officers, do not sufficiently challenge the quality of planning and recording. Inspectors identified that the appropriateness in the timing of transition of young people to the Next Steps team had not always been well considered.

The health needs of care leavers are addressed within the pathway planning process. However, care leavers do not always receive their medical histories or health passports to ensure that they have this important information for their future, despite senior managers raising this with health partners.

There is evidence of effective involvement of care leavers in shaping services and influencing their own plans for the future. This includes involvement in the change council, which represents the voices of children and young people who are in care in Sunderland. Care leavers speak very positively about the changes that have taken place since the Ofsted inspection in May and June 2015. Care leavers consistently report that they receive good support, are aware of their legal entitlements and are involved in pathway planning. This was seen through the support provided to access education and employment opportunities and in the data, which shows an increase in care leavers in education, employment and training and a decrease in those who are NEET. One care leaver reported that the help and support received from her worker is 'amazing'. Care leavers have access to the 'mind of my own' app to help them to keep in touch with workers and to express their views, as well as a helpful folder which includes information about money, staying put, complaints and an A-Z of services.

In addition to the increased support for care leavers from their allocated workers, a key aspect of improvement for care leavers has been their access to better housing options. Increasing use and promotion of staying put arrangements and supported lodgings help to ensure that care leavers have a better range of options. At the time of the monitoring visit, just one care leaver was homeless and the local authority was responding quickly and appropriately to address the situation. The young people's tracked cases, sampled audits and discussions all showed that care leavers feel safe where they are living. The local authority has reflected the views of care leavers as

part of the commissioning of services, including the development of new housing provision. Young inspectors have reviewed all of the accommodation available and provided a star rating. Care leavers have been involved in the development of a DVD to showcase the different housing choices available.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Fiona J Millns

Her Majesty's Inspector