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**18 and 19 June 2019**

To Ms Katherine Fairclough

CEO

Cumbria County Council

Carlisle

**Two day formal visit by National Implementation Adviser for Care Leavers.**

Dear Katherine

Thank you for hosting my visit to Cumbria. This letter is the formal feedback following my visit and includes a set of points to note and recommendations that were agreed by senior officers and operational staff and will be part of my return visit in six months to review progress. As stated in the feedback meeting I was very impressed by the rapid progress made, the political buy-in, the clear leadership and management approach that was ambitious and aspirational. I got a real sense of passion and commitment to have a better offer for care leavers across the whole service area.

Points to Note and Actions

Corporate Centre

Cumbria have clearly acknowledged that they are on a journey of continuous improvement. What became evident was a clear ambition and passion at the Corporate Centre to have a better offer for care leavers. As a large county council they are aware of the challenges they face across six district councils but I was impressed by the determination to have one clear offer to care leavers across the whole county.

The Corporate Parenting Board has champions covering the six local areas which is a really positive starting point. I have suggested as a way of further embedding elected members into the detail of the local offer could be by way of having champions for a particular themed area and themed Boards. This will enable a larger spread across elected members.

I would like to see the membership of the Board extended to all partners i.e. DWP, Health, Probation, Adults and regeneration, etc, so there is a consistent offer/approach across the whole county. So in essence it does not matter where you live in the county you are a care leaver.

What was less evident was the health offer to care leavers post 18yrs. I would like the authority to engage health by discussing needs/vulnerabilities rather than eligibility and to translate operational needs into a good practice model i.e. if possible an emotional wellbeing worker based in leaving care to reduce the need for care leavers attending public health resources when these are not appropriate.

The local offer is good but I got a sense that it depended on where you live in the county. There was a level of local offer discretion by managers that has led to some confusion for both care leavers and staff. It would be good to see a joined up approach by having a clear set of guarantees/givens that apply to all care leavers across the county to ensure consistency.

Apprenticeships/Skills approach is developing but needs wider engagement from business and regeneration which will give a greater choice of opportunities to care leavers who are ready for EET, and for those who are just not ready for EET. To push this farther I would like to see an EET ringfenced target set for care leavers by the authority that is both aspirational and ambitious. For care leavers taking up apprenticeships an offer of National Living Wage would certainly be well received.

Data is well understood and destinations are clear and that ‘stories are becoming the new data’. Whilst this was a strength the team talked about lots of systems, processes and the need for compliance. I would like the authority to think about whether there is the correct balance between compliance and improvement in quality of practice. This need for performance and compliance will be impacting on the time available to do direct relationship based work with care leavers.

The Operational Model is good and a 16yrs+ approach with leaving care coming in as a speacilism at 16yrs is a good approach but I got a sense that operational staff felt their role was hindered as they could not see the offer from with the council and any buy-in from key partner agencies. The result of this is that staff spent large amount of time trying to work through complex processes, completing paperwork and chasing appeals rather than spending time with care leavers. Many of these processes have been written by the local authority and could therefore be changed.

Health was stated as the absent parent/partner and it was exceptional to have either a health worker or adult transition worker attend pathway plan meetings. The model could be strengthened further across the county by exploring a multi-agency specialist HUB approach in different parts of the county by using public resources i.e. local libraries to hold regular surgeries.

The housing offer was developing with a new Gateway Approach being led by commissioning which will increase the choice and offer of accommodation to care leavers. It was clear that there is no use of ‘intentionality’ for care leavers which is really positive.

Caseloads are high 28+ on some occasions. Staff described feeling overwhelmed at times. Nationally caseload levels are generally around 22 and are manageable if there is a multi-agency offer in place. This needs further work.

The authority have agreed to employ a care leaver ambassador which is really positive and a great opportunity for a care leaver.

HoS/Team

Throughout the day I got a real sense that officers wanted to make things happen.

Other points noted:

* Multi-agency buy-in is fairly weak. CSE issues do not end at 18yrs but agencies and specialisms disappear.
* Greater choice of placements for care leavers.
* HUB’s across the county would be good.
* Care leavers stories are beginning to be used at the Corporate Parenting Board to inform policy and practice.
* Pathways to be developed so that care leavers and agencies are clear what their offer is.
* Flexible approach when referring to Adults Services and Health if care leavers fail to attend an appointment or engage – don’t just close the referral speak to us.
* IRO’s to consider reviewing Pathway Plans up to 25yrs using a RAG approach.
* An Aspiration Audit to be undertaken linked to a business event to match children in care and care leavers to local opportunites.
* Paperwork is overwhelming and PA’s seem to be doing more admin work rather than developing relationships with care leavers. Is this the Corporate Ambition?
* The local authority to consider whether it can introduce a one referral pathway – i.e. the Pathway Plan to reduce the amount of referrals and duplication of information.
* Operational staff liked the idea of IT supporting their role i.e. Digital Recording.
* Caseloads are high and it does feel overwhelming as we are expected to do everything.
* The offer to care leavers over 21yrs is largely discretionally and care leavers stated they were unsure of any rights or entitlements.
* Taster and training flats are a good investment for care leavers and we would like to see more of these.

Care Leavers Feedback

I have to say there were no particular issues raised by care leavers and the feedback was very positive. What they said was:

* More support when you are in care.
* Too many changes of social workers and having to tell your story again is emotionally hard work.
* PA’s are really good but we get a sense that time with us is very precious as they are usually too busy to see us.
* The idea of having a care leaver ambassador would be great.
* Some foster carers just do it for the money. I was told at 18yrs that the Staying Put allowances meant I would have to move as they were reduced. That’s not fair.
* Apprenticeships are good but the wages mean we cant afford to take them up.
* Driving lessons are good.
* Its different depending on where you live as a care leaver. Why is that?
* Leisure passes are good but can we take someone for free.
* Leaving care grant feels quite restrictive and getting cash was also very difficult which reduces our right to choose.

Recommendations:

1. To consider the Champion Model Approach where elected members champion a particular area, meet operational staff and also care leavers to fully understand their journey and story that will inform policy changes.
2. Themed Boards to be considered.
3. Membership of the Board to be extended to all key partner agencies.
4. The local authority to consider a number of ringfenced opportunities for care leavers and setting an EET target.
5. A health offer to care leavers up to 25yrs to be developed.
6. A County wide set of guarantees/givens to be made clear to all care leavers.
7. The authority to think about whether there is the correct balance between compliance and improvement in quality of practice.
8. The LA have agreed to employ a Care Leaver Ambassador.
9. Pathways to be developed so that care leavers and agencies are clear what their offer is.
10. A more flexible approach when working with Adults and Health i.e. failure to attend appoitments.
11. IRO’s to consider reviewing Pathway Plans up to 25yrs using a RAG approach.
12. An Aspiration Audit to be undertaken linked to a business event to match children in care and care leavers to local opportunites.
13. The local authority to consider whether it can introduce a one referral pathway – i.e. the Pathway Plan to reduce the amount of referrals and duplication of information.
14. Operational staff liked the idea of IT supporting their role i.e. Digital Recording.
15. Caseloads to be reviewed.
16. The offer to care leavers over 21yrs is largely discretionally and needs further discussion to ensure a clear offer is in place.
17. Could more Taster and Training flats be developed.

I hope my visit and the feedback/recommendations have been useful and I look forward to seeing you in six months.

M.Riddell MBE

Mark Riddell MBE

National Implementation Adviser for Care Leavers