

05 August 2016

Ms Suzanne Joyner
Darlington Borough Council
Town Hall
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Dear Ms Joyner

Monitoring visit of Darlington Borough Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit of Darlington Borough Council children's services on 10 and 11 July 2016.

The visit was the first monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate for services to children who need help and protection, in September 2015.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in respect of help and protection with a particular focus on four important themes:

- the quality of the single assessment
- recognition and management of risk
- the quality and timeliness of child protection enquiries
- management oversight.

Inspectors also considered:

- the arrangements in place to respond to child sexual exploitation
- the timely application of the Public Law Outline (PLO).

A range of evidence was considered during the visit, including electronic case records, supervision files and notes, observation of social workers undertaking assessments and other information provided by staff and managers. In addition, we

spoke to a range of staff, including managers, social workers, other practitioners and a senior representative from Durham Constabulary.

Summary of findings

- The council has responded purposefully to the recommendations made following the single inspection in 2015.
- A new senior leadership team is highly visible, accessible and demonstrates a comprehensive understanding of the key priorities for improvement.
- Performance management arrangements have improved significantly, and have been supported by an extensive auditing programme. Findings are widely reported across the senior leadership team and to elected members to ensure that strengths and areas for improvement are known and understood.
- The workforce is not yet stable. There is a high turnover of social workers and an over reliance on agency staff. Children and young people are experiencing too many changes in social worker, which impacts on the continuity of casework and the timely progression of their care plans.
- Structural changes, increased social work capacity, enhanced practical support and the co-location of social work teams is beginning to improve management oversight and staff morale. Social workers are receiving regular supervision and report feeling valued and well supported.
- A reduction in social work caseloads is resulting in improved timeliness of single assessments and is enabling social workers to see children and young people during assessments.
- While the timeliness of single assessments has improved, the quality of assessments remains poor. Risk analysis is weak and assessments lack evidence of multi-agency involvement. The impact of cumulative neglect is not well understood or recognised.
- Child protection enquiries are not informed by multi-agency discussion and decisions made within a strategy meeting.
- Arrangements to safeguard children and young people who are at risk of being sexually exploited are not consistently ensuring that children are protected.
- While social workers and their managers receive regular supervision, it is not sufficiently focused on the quality of social work practice or professional development.

Evaluation of progress

There is effective leadership from the director of children and adult services, who was appointed in December 2015, and a clear focus on priorities. Leadership across the council is highly visible, accessible and is beginning to engender confidence within the workforce and with partner agencies. An improved performance management and quality assurance framework, including an extensive audit program, is providing senior managers with a solid understanding of performance and areas for improvement. Senior leaders know themselves well. Action plans are appropriately focused and thematic audits are targeting almost all areas where improvements are required. However, not all staff undertaking audits understand well enough what good practice looks like. Therefore, not all audits identify where improvement is needed.

Structural changes and co-location of social work teams are beginning to improve management oversight. A new electronic case management system has been commissioned. Social workers say that they feel well supported by managers. Social workers and their managers receive regular supervision and training, although this is not yet leading to an improvement in the quality of social work practice. Supervision does not reflect well enough on the quality and impact of social work interventions or whether the child is making sufficient progress in a timely way. The quality of social work practice and social workers' professional development is not given enough consideration during supervision.

The council has recognised where service capacity does not fully meet demand and is taking effective action to address this. A new recruitment and retention plan is beginning to have a positive impact. Recruitment has been successful in strengthening senior and operational management arrangements, with a focus on securing a permanent workforce. The local authority has recruited to three assistant director posts for children's and adults services, replacing posts that were previously deleted to increase operational management oversight and accountability. More social workers have been recruited which has resulted in a reduction of caseloads for some social workers.

However, the workforce is not yet stable. There is a high turnover of social workers and an over reliance on agency staff. Children and young people are still experiencing too many changes in social worker, which is impacting on the continuity of casework. Children's plans are not as sharply focused as they could be and they are not being progressed in a timely way. Children are unable to build or maintain trusting and positive relationships with their social worker. Senior managers are taking appropriate action to address this but it is too soon to see an impact. Social workers are benefiting from enhanced practical support and there is improved staff morale.

Vulnerable children who may be at risk of harm do not always receive an adequate assessment of their needs. While a reduction in social work caseloads is resulting in

improved timeliness of single assessments and is enabling social workers to undertake direct work with children and young people, the quality of assessments has not yet improved. Social workers are overly focused on timescales for completing assessments and this is impacting on their capacity to carry out full and detailed enquiries. Assessments do not evidence where key agency professionals have been consulted, are over reliant on parental self-report and do not demonstrate social workers challenging or checking out what parents are telling them. The child's family history is not well researched or sufficiently considered. There are weaknesses in the recording of strategy discussions. Decisions to progress to child protection enquiries are not being informed by discussion with key partner agencies, including the police and health.

The cumulative impact of neglect is not well understood. Interventions to safeguard children and young people are not timely enough when children's circumstances do not improve. The Public Law Outline is not used effectively to identify what assessments are needed to avoid delay for children who may need a plan of permanence outside of the family. It is not used effectively to give families a final opportunity to make changes to avoid care proceedings and help them fully understand the consequence of not making the necessary changes to protect children.

Children and young people who go missing from home or education or who are at risk of being sexually exploited are identified early and interventions to safeguard them commence swiftly. However, the current child sexual exploitation risk assessment tool is not fit for purpose. It does not support social work analysis of risk sufficiently to inform assessment about the risk of harm to children and young people.

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

Yours sincerely,

Tracey Metcalfe

Her Majesty's Inspector