

7 July 2017

Ms Suzanne Joyner  
Darlington Borough Council  
Town Hall  
Darlington  
DL1 5QT

Dear Ms Joyner

### **Monitoring visit of Darlington Borough Council children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Darlington Borough Council children's services on 7 and 8 June 2017. This was the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate for services to children who need help and protection, in September 2015. While steady progress has been maintained for children in need of help and protection, this has not been sustained for children looked after for whom some services have not improved sufficiently. The visit was carried out by Her Majesty's Inspector, Tracey Metcalfe, and Ofsted Inspectors, Fiona Millns and Maria Anastasi (shadow inspector).

### **Areas covered by the visit**

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the effectiveness of performance management and quality assurance arrangements. Inspectors focused on:

- the effectiveness of performance management information
- the quality assurance framework
- the quality of social work practice and management oversight
- the effectiveness of scrutiny by senior leaders and elected members.

The visit considered a range of evidence, including scrutiny of children's records in the Life Stages team, which is a service for children and young adults, aged 0–25, who have disabilities; interviews with social workers and managers; and local authority audit activity. In addition, inspectors spoke to senior leaders and elected members and heads of service responsible for performance management and quality assurance, and they scrutinised a wide range of data and documentation.

### **Overview**

Governance arrangements have been strengthened, performance management is much improved and quality assurance systems are becoming more effective. Workforce stability is improving. There has been sustained progress in services to

children in need of help and protection in relation to the response times to contacts and referrals, the completion of assessments and the timeliness of statutory visits and reviews. However, there has been some deterioration in services to children who are looked after as well as the quality of some services to children who have a disability.

## **Findings and evaluation of progress**

Performance management and quality assurance arrangements are much improved. Senior leaders and managers are committed to the development of a rigorous performance culture. A new head of service for performance was appointed in December 2016. The recent appointments of a head of service quality assurance in March 2017 and an additional management post for performance are adding capacity into the system and already evidencing positive impact.

Data is being used more intelligently to interrogate performance in monthly clinics that team managers attend. Exception reports are sent to team managers on a weekly basis with data analyst support to help team managers to understand the story behind the data. The chief executive officer (CEO) and the director of children's and adults' services (DCAS) attend six-weekly performance clinics with all heads of service, which is ensuring that senior leaders have comprehensive knowledge of what is happening at the front line, and how effectively children are helped and protected.

The most recent quarterly performance reports have been redesigned. Helpful flow charts provide the reader with an immediate overview of performance activity and outcomes. Scorecards are informative and supported by percentages, comparative data and analysis of where performance has improved and where it has been sustained. While this is evidence of progress, this is not analysed and recorded in a way that encourages sufficient curiosity and challenge.

There has been sustained improvement in compliance with statutory timescales, for example the screening of contacts to children's social care, responding to child protection concerns and the timeliness in completing children's assessments, although the quality of assessments and children's plans is yet to show consistent improvement. In five of six children's records reviewed in the Life Stages team, assessments did not explore the family history well enough. The children's relationships with brothers, sisters, extended family and birth fathers were not carefully considered. Children's plans are not outcome focused. Plans are overly focused on practical needs, direct payments and socialisation, rather than on children's holistic needs. Contingency planning is underdeveloped. Children's voices are not reflected well, and there is limited evidence that children are involved in the development of their plans.

Children in receipt of short breaks and who receive direct payments do not have their plans reviewed in a timely way. The plans and, subsequently, the services that some children receive have not been reviewed for a number of years. Some reviews are undertaken by unqualified workers, and these reviews have not been consistently

overseen by a qualified social worker or manager. This means for that when some children's needs and circumstances have changed and, in some cases, deteriorated, this has not been identified. Consequently, there have been some missed opportunities to intervene and delays in children and their families receiving the most appropriate services to meet their needs.

Senior managers had already identified, in this part of the service, that 61 children's plans had not been reviewed appropriately. However, an action plan, which is in place to address this, has not ensured timely action to safeguard all children. Inspectors identified, through record sampling, a safeguarding concern in respect of two children during the visit, which would not otherwise have been identified quickly enough. Consequently, the DCAS has taken action to deploy additional resources to review all children's circumstances in this service with immediate effect.

Workforce stability has improved, particularly in the Looked After Children's Team (LATC), and children are now benefiting from more consistent relationships with social workers. Improved performance management information has led to more targeted activity in this service, as progress has previously been slow and in some areas has deteriorated. This was identified by inspectors at the previous monitoring visit in February 2017. Senior managers have a much-improved understanding of performance and are taking decisive action to address this, now that they are permanently staffed. A high turnover of social workers and managers, since the last inspection, has impacted negatively on the quality of social work practice and on children's plans being progressed. Placement stability has deteriorated. Children are experiencing too many moves before a permanent placement is secured. It is too early to judge the impact of a robust new placement strategy.

Senior managers recognise quality assurance processes need to align more effectively with performance data to inform targeted audit and improvement activity. In April 2017, a new children's services practice framework and performance management and quality management systems were developed, and implementation has begun with the appointment of a head of service quality assurance and an additional performance manager post. There is a sustained focus on improving the frequency and quality of supervision. Supervision records seen in the Life Stages team evidence that social workers are now receiving monthly supervision, and there is improved scrutiny of performance. While some improvement is evident, records do not show how supervision is being used to reflect on the impact of social work interventions or the quality of social work practice.

There is a very recent improvement in the quality and frequency of performance information provided to elected members and the scrutiny committee. This is significant progress since the last inspection. Until April 2017, an annual report to the scrutiny committee and elected members was insufficient to enable a comprehensive understanding of performance or opportunity to challenge and hold senior managers to account. The more recent (April 2017) reports contain improved analysis and narrative, explaining the data. Inspectors have seen some evidence of improved scrutiny and lead member challenge to senior managers, although recorded minutes are brief and do not evidence impact.

The lead member has been proactive in seeking out training and external peer support to improve the effectiveness of challenge and understanding of performance information. This can be seen in records of overview reports, in challenging the role of partners on the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) and in influencing improved membership across the partnership with the Health and Wellbeing Board.

The recently appointed chair of the scrutiny committee has injected fresh energy into the role. Members of the committee have had extensive mandatory training, and this has resulted in improved challenge, insight and focus. For example, they have influenced some deep-dive auditing work in respect of early help services for 0–3-year-olds. However, the chair acknowledges that the committee has more work to do to build an infrastructure to support and maintain effective challenge and scrutiny.

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**