
UPDATE ON CHILDREN'S SERVICES IMPROVEMENTS

**Responsible Cabinet Member - Councillor Cyndi Hughes,
Children and Young People Portfolio**

**Responsible Director – Suzanne Joyner
Director of Children and Adult Services**

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. The purpose of this report is to update Cabinet of the improvements to date within Children's Social Care, since the publication of the Ofsted report on Services to Children in Need of Help and Protection, Children Looked After and Care Leavers on 1 September 2015.

Summary

2. Following publication of the report, on 8 December 2015 Cabinet agreed to receive regular reports on progress in implementing the Children's Services Improvement Plan. This report summarises progress on improvements since the last report in October 2016.

Recommendation

3. It is recommended that Members consider and scrutinise the information contained in the report and agree if further information is required regarding any of the specific areas raised in the report.

Reasons

4. That Cabinet agreed they should receive regular update reports on improvement progress.

**Suzanne Joyner
Director of Children and Adults Services**

Background Papers

- (i) Darlington Children's Services Improvement Plan 2015-17
- (ii) Ofsted – Inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers
- (iii) Review of the effectiveness of the Local Safeguarding Children Board
- (iv) Ofsted Monitoring Visit Letters – July 2016 and October 2016
- (v) DfE six and twelve month reviews
- (vi) Letter from Minister of State for Vulnerable Children and Families – June 2016 and January 2017

S17 Crime and Disorder	This report has no implications for Crime and disorder.
Health and Well Being	This report has the implications for the health and wellbeing of vulnerable groups of children.
Carbon Impact	This report has no implications for Carbon Impact.
Diversity	This report has no implications for Diversity.
Wards Affected	All wards within the Borough of Darlington are affected.
Groups Affected	Looked After Children and Care Leavers and Children in Need of Help and Protection.
Budget and Policy Framework	This report does not recommend any changes to the budget and policy framework.
Key Decision	This is not a key decision.
Urgent Decision	This is not an urgent matter.
One Darlington: Perfectly Placed	This report has no implications for One Darlington: Perfectly Placed.
Efficiency	This report has no implications for Carbon Impact.

MAIN REPORT

Overview of Monitoring to Date

4. Since the last update to Cabinet, the following have taken place:
 - (a) Second Ofsted Monitoring Visit (see **Appendix A**) – October 2016
 - (b) DfE Annual Review – November 2016
 - (c) Letter from Minister of State for Vulnerable Children and Families – January 2017
 - (d) Third Ofsted Monitoring Visit (awaiting letter) – February 2017
 - (e) Monthly Childrens Services Improvement Boards – Monthly until February 2017, Bi-monthly thereafter

5. In October 2017 the second Ofsted monitoring visit took place, looking at the experience and progress of children looked after, as defined in the monitoring visit letter. Inspectors noted that the council continued to respond purposefully to the inspection recommendations. They noted that children spoken to by the inspectors felt safe in their placements and in school, and that they receive good support from their social workers.

6. The DfE annual review involved engagement with staff, managers and key stakeholders, to evaluate and triangulate work relating to the improvement journey. This culminated in a report to the Minister of State, making recommendations regarding the next phase of the intervention. Verbal feedback on the day was positive, and our progress to date was felt to be appropriate, with pace and commitment from across the Council being evident.

7. The annual review was followed up by the letter from the Minister of State. This acknowledged progress made to date, whilst recognising the work still to do in relation to recruiting a stable workforce, and the impact that this would have on improving practice. Importantly, the Minister accepted the recommendation made by the DfE to reduce the improvement board from monthly to bi-monthly, evidencing confidence that the council have and will continue to respond positively and at pace.

8. The third Ofsted monitoring visit took place in February 2017, which looked at whether children receive help that is appropriate to risk. Whilst we are awaiting the formal letter, verbal feedback noted that the local authority has made good progress in relation to how social workers and managers respond to contacts to children's social care, and the quality and timeliness of child protection enquiries.

9. Each of the monitoring visits provide a deep dive into a particular aspect of children's social care, enabling us to focus our improvement intervention appropriately, and ensuring that we continue to respond purposefully. The themes that have emerged, which remain a priority for focus, include continued development on:
 - (a) The performance data set
 - (b) Management oversight and supervision
 - (c) Social work practice, quality of assessment and robustly evidencing rationales for decision making

Continued Improvement Performance and Quality Monitoring

10. Work has continued in relation to addressing key areas for continued improvement, and this section provides examples of work to date.
11. The monthly performance framework is a set of indicators that measure processes. This has continued to develop, and was updated and the most recent dataset was approved by the Improvement Board in August 2016.
12. Some of the measures included are proxy indicators, which evidence the quality of social work intervention, such as the number for children with being re-referred and the number of children that have another child protection plan within a short space of time from a previous one ending.
13. The auditing programme continues to be a fundamental aspect of the performance framework, as this ensures a focus on individual practice standards. Audits are used as individual, team and service wide learning, and shape the ongoing training and development plan. The repeated focus on children who are subject to s20 accommodation arrangements has been an example of how a focus over time has brought benefits both through achieving permanency and improving practice ensuring that children are secured within the care of a family member under a Court Order such as Special Guardianship, therefore reducing the time of intervention from the local authority.

Practice Improvement

14. The 2015 inspection identified significant issues with the timeliness of work. Children and Family Assessments are expected to be completed in 45 day, and at the time of the inspection 51% assessments were completed within timescale. Performance as of January 2017 was 92%, and this has remained consistently at this level during the last six month. By completing assessments in a timely way children receive essential support and services to improve home circumstances or intervention is initiated promptly if change is not evident/sustained by their parents.

Example of Good Practice

A recent (Jan 17) audit of assessments undertaken found that;

- Children were being listened to
- Children were able to state what they wanted to change to improve their lives

15. The numbers of children who had their initial child protection conference within 15 days has been at 100% consistently during the past six months, compared with 73% at the time of the inspection. This means that children who need a comprehensive multi-agency plan in order to safeguard their wellbeing are discussed in a timely meeting, so that the child who may be living in an abusive

environment, such as domestic abuse, receives interventions speedily to reduce the risk, enabling them to live in home conditions free from harm.

16. The number of children that have been referred to Children's Social Care for the second time or more within 12 months was low at 5.5% and the numbers of children who were on child protection plan for a second or subsequent time within two years was zero. There are no children who have been on child protection plans for more than two years since April 2016. These are all proxy indicators that evidence the positive impact of our work on improving outcomes for children that have been known to services.
17. In the last six months, there has been an increase in the number of children whose futures are being decided within the Court arena. Currently there are 104 children being managed within the Public Law Outline (PLO) process. The introduction of the Social Work Evidence Template (SWET) with the associated training for social workers has meant that there is an increase in consistency and the quality of information being submitted to Court.
18. The recruitment of five Advanced Practitioners within the CAP, Initial Response team and the four Assessment and Safeguarding teams has ensured that within each team there is an experienced practitioner who now has a reduced caseload enabling them to mentor less experienced colleagues and support the team managers in improving practice.

Example of Good Practice

An example of the direct work being undertaken with children

During a recent contested Special Guardianship Order the direct work undertaken by the social worker with the children was complemented on by the Judge and used to ensure that the children's voice was heard during the Court process

19. As corporate parents to our looked after children work is being undertaken to ensure that their care plans are of good quality and are based on an up-to-date assessment of their needs.
20. A challenge still remains regarding the timeliness of Initial Health Assessments that are completed when a child becomes looked after. To continue the focus on improvement there is a joint action plan, owned by the Clinical Commissioning Group, County Durham and Darlington Foundation Trust and Children's Social Care, to ensure that the assessments and reviews are completed in a timely way. This is being monitored and challenged through the Improvement Board, the LSCB and the Corporate Parenting Panel.
21. Education has been clearly evidenced as a major factor in improving outcomes in adulthood. The introduction of the ePEP system and continued work by the Virtual School Head (VSH) and liaison with Designated Teachers has further strengthened the multi-disciplinary working in this area.

Example of Success

Out of the looked after children that have been transitioning from year 11 to year 12 this year, all are in further education

Provision

Employment with in house Training - not at Level 2 = 1

Post 16 - College of Further Education = 10

Post 16 - College Sixth Form = 1

Post 16 - School Year 12 = 2

Training - Study Programme = 5

Stabilising the Workforce

22. Clearly one of the important measures of an authority is whether it was enough capacity within its social workers to manage the number of children. The inspection highlighted not just the importance of capacity but also ensuring that there are suitably experienced and qualified practitioners.
23. The recruitment of five Advanced Practitioners, located within CAP, Initial Response team and the four Assessment and Safeguarding teams, has ensured that each team has an experienced practitioner. They have a reduced caseload, which enables them to support and mentor less experienced social workers and also support the team managers in improving practice.
24. The Council continues to maintain a dedicated microsite to support the ongoing recruitment campaign. We also continue to engage in specialist national recruitment fairs to raise the profile of Darlington and the positive changes made regarding being a social worker in here. In addition to standard advertising, social media sites such as twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook are to be utilised in the promoting of adverts for vacant posts.
25. The proportion of agency staff is currently 35%. This is concentrated within the four Assessment and Safeguarding teams, although the turnover of agency staff has decreased over the last six months and this is beneficial for children who have an allocated worker who knows them and they can develop a relationship with.
26. Stabilising frontline staff is important in terms of developing consistent good practice and working as a team to build a culture in which quality is a fundamental feature. Agency staff are included in training, briefings and staff engagement sessions, to ensure that they work within the standards and the culture of the service.
27. Benchmarking staff salaries was completed in 2016 to ensure that Darlington is comparable with surrounding neighbouring authorities, to allow us to compete for highly experienced quality staff.

28. Since May 2016 we have recruited a number of agency workers into permanent posts, returning staff to the authority and appointed a permanent IRO and Team Manager. We have also promoted social workers into Advanced Practitioner roles.
29. Alongside the continued recruitment activity, there are an increasing number of agency social workers who are demonstrating good child focussed practice. A proactive approach has been taken to ensure that they feel involved in Darlington's journey so that they understand the change in culture and have ownership of how their work impacts on young people and families in the Borough.
30. It is essential that we continue to make explicit and continue to reiterate what 'good looks like'. To assist in this, the new Supervision Policy and Social Work Standards documents were rolled out during September 2016 to staff. The supervision policy consolidates the understanding of the responsibilities of both the supervisor and the supervisee in this vital aspect of social work practice.
31. These Practice Standards set out the basic and simple expectations of practice. They are a live tool and will be continually updated as we introduce new ways of working, for example as we update our processes for child in need or implement the signs of safety model we will introduce new practice standards that will be incorporated into the overarching document. The management team believe it is important to have agreed practice standards so we can measure our compliance as a service against agreed basics developed from professional knowledge of what 'good practice' looks like.
32. Communication and engagement is pivotal to the improvement work, and in culture change, ensuring that key messages are shared and that staff have the opportunity to share views, ideas etc. Social Work Seminars continue to be an element of this, and were held in June 2016, November 2016 and January 2017. These are planned throughout the year so that staff are assured of their importance and the commitment of a visible senior team.
33. A key aspect for social work practice is manageable caseloads. This enables staff to have time to support children and families appropriately, and is a significant issue when attracting permanent staff to any Local Authority. Our average caseloads have reduced over the last 9 months and are being maintained at below 18 in the Assessment and Safeguarding teams and 20 in the Looked After Through Care (LATC) team. Initial Response have slightly higher caseloads but reflect that they do not hold long term cases. This compares favourably with authorities judged as being 'good' such as Leeds.
34. Training has continued involving all staff whether they are permanent or agency. Feedback from staff continues to be positive in terms of quality and appropriateness of courses offered.

Performance Management

35. The new case recording system was successfully implemented at the beginning of October 2016. This was the culmination of some 15 months of planning and has meant the transfer of all electronic recording to a new system. The changes also have meant that the financial system for foster carers and adoption and SGO support plans is now linked with child's record. At the October Ofsted monitoring visit, Inspectors commended the work from Children's Services in the implementation process of the system.
36. The timely implementation of the new system was key to the continued improvement work, as Liquid Logic has more functionality than Care First, thus enabling us to further expand and develop our data set. Expanding the data collected and reported has been a significant action since implementation, and continues.

Example of Success

The recent transition from Carefirst to Liquid Logic has gone well with 100% of children's plans being transferred within 6 working days.

Staff already report that the new system provides far better information about their work and managers are able to access reports about activity within their own team.

Governance and Leadership

37. A schedule of reporting is now in place to ensure Members have a thorough oversight of performance. A work programme for the forthcoming months has been developed, providing updates on audit activity, recruitment and retention and specific matters relating to children looked after. These will present updates on improvements whilst highlighting areas for further challenge and scrutiny.
38. A programme of training for elected members to effectively discharge their statutory responsibilities was successfully completed.
39. Work is being finalised regarding the Children's Trust arrangements.
40. The LSCB continues to develop under the new leadership arrangements in place through the Independent Chair.
41. The Director of Children and Adults Services meets on a regular basis with the Independent Chair of the Darlington Safeguarding Children's Board.
42. The Children's Services Improvement Board has been reduced to bi-monthly following the most recent DFE visit November 2016 and gives oversight to progress alongside a thematic "deep dive" on key issues. Engagement from partners is proving valuable in providing challenge and support.

Next Steps

43. Further development of a culture which values evidence based practice. Within this overarching aim there is a need to embed consistency and encourage learning. With that in mind the following are priorities in the next three months:
- (a) Focused emphasis on the training needs of managers to ensure robust management accountability and oversight
 - (b) Continue to improve quality of practice, by embedding the expected standards for both practitioners and managers
 - (c) Develop systematic feedback from:
 - (i) Children and their families
 - (ii) Staff
 - (iii) Partners
 - (d) Continued development of our audit activity, ensuring that we 'Close the Loop' with managers and staff, in order to embed learning through a strengths based approach
 - (e) Further develop training and learning activity to meet the continued development needs of the workforce.

External Scrutiny**Ofsted Monitoring Visits**

The monitoring visit in July 2016 found that:

- Performance management arrangements have improved significantly and are supported by an extensive auditing programme
- Workforce is not stable. There is a high turnover of social workers and an overreliance on agency staff.
- 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
- The timeliness of assessments has improved, the quality 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 focussed on the quality of social work practice or professional development.

The monitoring visit in October 2016 concentrating on Looked After Through Care found that:

- The council has continued to respond purposefully to the recommendations identified following the single inspection in 2015. In particular conducting a thorough review of all arrangements when children are accommodated under the section 20 and when children are living in family arrangements
- Performance in relation to the stability of short and long placements is improving for some children. Regional partnership working is used to commission good placements for children, although there continues to be a shortfall in the number of available placements for children with more complex and challenging needs
- Children who spoke to inspectors said they feel safe in their placements and in school. They receive good support from their social workers and carers
- The senior leadership team has undertaken an examination of the service they provide to children looked after and has a comprehensive understanding of the key priorities for improvement. While the examination has identified where improvements have been made, it has also identified a deterioration in the services that some children receive, in particular the reassessment of children's needs, planning for permanence and leaving care. Weaknesses were also

identified in frontline management oversight and in the supervision available to social workers.

- Whilst there has been improvement in the timeliness of children's plans being reviewed, IROs do not demonstrate sufficient rigour when overseeing the quality and progress of children's plans.
- Decisive action has now been taken to address shortfalls when social work practice, management oversight and IRO scrutiny has not met the required standard. New practice expectations have been set, supported by an increase in staff resource, training and robust performance management and quality assurance arrangements.
- A new electronic case management system is now implemented, which is beginning to provide full case management capabilities with better functionality and ease of use. This has resulted in increased confidence in the system by practitioners and managers.
- Performance management and quality assurance arrangements have been further strengthened. Children requiring permanent placements are identified and tracked as they progress through the Public Law Outline process. While positive, the tracking is still not yet translating in to activity to ensure that actions within children's plans are delivered in a timely way.

The letter from the Minister of State for Vulnerable Children and Families (January 2017) noted the following:

- The DfE intervention will remain at the current level
- The Council is continuing to prioritise the improvement of children services
- There are now clear practice standards and a robust performance management framework with reliable data for scrutiny and challenge
- Further progress is needed in ensuring consistently good social work practice and securing enough experienced permanent social workers
- Based on the sense of progress which Darlington is making consistently across all assessments the Improvement Board can meet on a bi-monthly basis

A further monitoring visit was undertaken in February 2017, we await formal confirmation of the outcome.