

20 March 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 16 and 17 February 2017. This was the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate for services to children who need help and protection in September 2015. The visit was carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectors, Tracey Metcalfe and Jan Edwards.

The local authority is beginning to make some progress in improving the experience of children when they first come to the attention of children's services.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed whether children receive help that is proportionate to risk. Inspectors focused on:

- the local authority's responses to contact and referrals
- information sharing between agencies and professionals
- the quality of child protection enquiries
- the quality of children's assessments and plans
- management oversight of practice.

The visit considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, supervision files, observation of the practice of social workers and senior practitioners undertaking referral and assessment duties, as well as other information provided by staff and managers. In addition, inspectors spoke to a range of staff, including managers, social workers, other practitioners and administrative staff.

Overview

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 timeliness and quality of child protection enquiries. Inspectors saw much evidence of improved compliance in meeting statutory timescales, although the quality of children's experiences, social work practice and management oversight is not consistently embedded. The quality of children's assessments and plans has not improved to a good enough standard. While there is an improved suite of performance management information, this is not comprehensive, is too focused on quantitative data and does not support quality assurance well enough.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Contacts to children's social care receive a timely and effective response. All contacts are screened at the advice point by experienced social workers. Those reviewed by inspectors evidenced robust agency checks and appropriate decisions signed off by managers with a clear rationale for further actions. However, this service is under pressure as the numbers of contacts to children's social care are increasing. In the six months leading up to this visit, 43% of contacts resulted in no further action. The current performance management arrangements have not identified this issue or explored the extent to which contacts and referrals meet the threshold for access to children's social care or the locally agreed quality standard.

Inspectors also identified that a significant proportion of contacts are domestic abuse notifications and these are not triaged by police before being sent to children's social care. Police representatives who spoke to inspectors recognise that not all contacts require a social care response, but it is currently Durham constabulary's protocol to send all notifications to children's social care. This is causing additional and unnecessary work for children's social care. In addition, inspectors found that all calls received in relation to a case already open to children's social care are being recorded as new contacts. This inflates the number of contacts recorded and does not give senior managers an accurate account of the workload activity at its front door.

When child protection concerns are identified, the first response team (FRT) swiftly convenes strategy discussions that are well attended by key partner agencies. There is a highly effective relationship between children's social care and Durham constabulary. Child protection enquiries are robust and investigations are well recorded because of high quality information sharing and discussion. Almost all child and family assessments are completed in accordance with the level of identified need at the point of referral. While this is evidence of progress, the quality of children's assessments has not yet improved to a good enough standard.

There is now evidence of compliance, however, this has led to social workers and managers being overly focused on meeting timescales, and this limits their focus on the quality of assessment and the experiences of the child. As a result of the focus on timeliness and compliance, assessments do not consider sufficiently the broader risk factors in children's lives, such as the impact of wider family and environmental factors on the child's development. Research is not being used systematically to support risk analysis, and chronologies are not being effectively used. When information is sourced from other agencies, case records do not provide an audit trail of how or when information is gathered to inform the assessment. There is some evidence that social workers are beginning to undertake direct work with children in order to ascertain their views but this is not embedded in practice. Children's plans arising from assessments are not framed in terms of the measurable outcomes to be achieved and there is a lack of contingency planning. This means that interventions are not focused on all risks and needs and that parents and carers are not clear about what will happen if the child's circumstances do not improve.

Securing a permanent and skilled workforce is proving difficult to achieve because demand locally for experienced and permanent staff outstrips supply, and this is a significant barrier to improving the quality of social work practice. Currently, 53.5% of staff in the safeguarding teams are agency social workers. The turnover rate of social workers in these teams is 35.8%. This also impacts negatively on children as they are unable to make and sustain trusting relationships with social workers and there is evidence of delay for children with assessments stopping and starting when social workers leave and their cases are reallocated.

Senior managers have taken purposeful action to improve the workforce strategy both locally and across the region. The director of children's services is leading on regional workforce development. In an attempt to retain and attract permanent skilled and experienced social workers to Darlington, a great deal of work has taken place to create a healthier workplace, including safer workloads, the provision of more opportunities for staff to undertake direct work with children, a much improved electronic case management system to free up social workers from overly bureaucratic recording systems, and the piloting of mobile working to increase efficiencies and flexibility.

Performance management information considered in relation to this visit is quantitative and does not support quality assurance well enough. A much improved suite of performance information is available to managers at all levels, but this is not comprehensive. Audit activity seen by inspectors is overly focused on process and does not have sufficient impact on improving the quality of social work practice. Frontline managers are not provided with an analysis of performance data, so there is not a shared understanding of the story behind the data. The limited narrative provided to senior managers is descriptive rather than analytical and does not lead to the right questions being asked or explored. For example, the number of contacts made to social care each month are provided without any comparison to previous

months or indication of whether the rising figure is evidence of improvement or a cause for concern. In addition to this, there is no analysis of why high numbers of section 47 investigations do not result in an initial child protection conference and whether these enquiries are appropriate to ensure children and families are not unnecessarily subjected to formal child protection investigations. The data does not provide senior managers with information about how many children have experienced a change of social worker and what impact this has had on the progress of the child's assessment and plan.

Social workers and managers who spoke to inspectors are very enthusiastic and committed to their work. They advised that managers at all levels are highly visible, supportive and accessible. Social workers are now receiving more regular supervision, and recording of management oversight is improving. However, supervision records do not demonstrate how social workers are being helped to reflect on the quality of their practice or whether planned interventions are improving children's outcomes.

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