
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 provide an update to Cabinet on the improvements made 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 April 2017.

Recommendation

3. It is recommended that Cabinet consider the information contained 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, October 2016, February 2017 and September 2017
- (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 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.
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	This report has implications for the care and wellbeing of Looked After Children and Care Leavers.

MAIN REPORT

Overview of Monitoring to Date Ofsted Monitoring Visits

4. Since the last update to Cabinet, the following have taken place:
 - (a) Publication of Monitoring Visit (February 2017) Three Letter in March 2017 (see **Appendix A**)
 - (b) Ofsted Monitoring Visits Four (June 2017) and Five (September 2017) (see Appendix B and Appendix C)
 - (c) DfE Review 28th June 2017 (Appendix D)
 - (d) Monthly Childrens Services Improvement Boards – Monthly until February 2017, Bi-monthly thereafter.
5. It was reported to Cabinet in April 2017 that the third Ofsted Monitoring Visit had taken place in February 2017 and focussed on:
 - (a) the Authority's response to contact and referrals
 - (b) information sharing between agencies and professionals
 - (c) the quality of child protection enquiries
 - (d) the quality of children's assessments and plans
 - (e) management oversight of practice.
6. At the time of reporting, the findings had not yet been published. The monitoring visit letter (**Appendix A**) reported that Inspectors found that Contacts to Children's Social Care received a timely and effective response with robust checks and appropriate decisions made. They also noted, good progress to the timeliness and quality of child protection enquiries, and found much evidence of improved compliance in meeting statutory timescales.
7. Inspectors noted that there was evidence of statutory compliance, although added, 'overly focusing on timescales could limit Managers focus on quality of assessment'.
8. To continue the focus on practice improvement a more robust improved Audit Programme was reintroduced in June 2017, which has evidenced continuing improvement in the quality of assessments being undertaken. Formal Audit activity is now routinely reported in quarterly Performance Management Reports and includes both monthly Case File Audits and Early Help Assessment Audits.
9. Other methods are also used to monitor practice improvement, such as dip sampling, team and individual showcasing good practice, and external audits.
10. Audit findings are incorporated into service area practice sessions and workforce development and training schedule, which then meets the continued development needs of the workforce, thus improving service delivery and outcomes.

11. In the fourth visit in June 2017 inspectors focused on the:
 - (a) effectiveness of performance management information
 - (b) quality assurance framework
 - (c) quality of social work practice and management oversight
 - (d) effectiveness of scrutiny by senior leaders and Elected Members
12. In the letter (**Appendix B**), inspectors confirmed that governance arrangements had been strengthened, performance management was much improved and quality assurance systems were effective. The stability of the workforce was also noted as improving.
13. Inspectors found sustained progress in services to Children in Need of Help and Protection, in relation to response times to Contacts and Referrals. Worth noting, was the reference to timely completion of assessments, statutory visits and reviews.
14. Areas for improvement were highlighted in relation to Life Stages Review processes. The process has now been amended with improved practice now being evidenced via audit within this area of work.
15. The fifth and final monitoring in September 2017 concentrated on the experience and progress of children looked after, with a particular focus on:
 - (a) planning for permanence
 - (b) quality of children's plans
 - (c) management oversight
 - (d) effectiveness of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs).
16. In the letter (**Appendix C**), Inspectors confirmed that since their last visit, new and improved systems had been put in place which effectively track children's progress from when they become looked after.
17. Improved focus on permanence by the child's second review was beginning to reduce drift and delay and children were now being accommodated appropriately under Section 20. Senior managers' oversight of the Public Law Outline (PLO) had improved, which was helping social workers to navigate the pre-proceedings phase more effectively, resulting in children's cases being put promptly before the Family Court.
18. Workforce stability had greatly improved which meant that children were experiencing fewer changes of social worker.
19. A key finding from this final monitoring visit was recognition that compliance with statutory requirements, in all areas had been achieved.
20. In line with comments from the Inspectors, the service area have ensured that improvements were made in relation to developing a more robust self-assessment and improving focus on the quality and consistency of practice. Evidence as to the improvements in the quality of assessments and plans is demonstrated through a

robust audit programme where in November 2017 key findings showed 93% of audits were judged as either Requires Improvement or better.

21. It was confirmed that this monitoring visit would be the last visit conducted by Ofsted, before a re-inspection under the Single Inspection Framework. The re-inspection will be an unannounced inspection in 2018.

Department for Education Reviews (DfE)

22. The DfE review took place on 28 June 2017 attended by the DfE Link Officer, and the Independent Chair of the Children's Service's Improvement Board. During this review they met with a range of social workers and managers, as well as stakeholders, to discuss their progress and work to date.
23. Feedback was positive, with the review team praising the improvement progress to date, and acknowledging the continued improving morale of the workforce.
24. Following the review, it had been custom to receive a letter from the Minister for Children, however the Council were informed that the new Minister was taking a more risk based approach and was only writing to those Councils giving greater concern, and as such Darlington would not receive a letter.
25. The DfE Link Officer agreed subsequently to provide her written account of the review (**Appendix D**), which confirmed that there had been clear progress in the following areas since the last review:
 - (a) Ongoing visibility of senior management
 - (b) Effective engagement and challenge from members
 - (c) Enhanced performance management and reporting following the launch of Liquid Logic
 - (d) A fresh audit programme
 - (e) Increased workforce stability and reduced agency staff
 - (f) Ongoing completion of improvement plan actions and the rapid development of the LSCB under new leadership

Children Service's Improvement Board

26. The Board has continued to monitor and challenge where appropriate, performance of Children's Services and delivery against the Improvement Plan
27. Since April 2017, the Board has received specific reports and presentations on the following themes:
 - (a) Young adults leaving care
 - (b) Workforce Development
 - (c) Early Help
 - (d) Quality Assurance
 - (e) Independent Reviewing Officer Service
 - (f) Placement Stability of Looked after Children
 - (g) Children Subject to Child Protection Plans

28. This has allowed the Board to scrutinise these areas more closely, to ensure that sufficient progress is being made, and that improvement actions are resulting in demonstrable change within the service.
29. The Chair of the Improvement Board has provided additional support and challenge by carrying out direct work with Social Workers, Team Managers, Service Managers and Heads of Service. This direct work has focussed on:
 - (a) The Quality Assurance and Performance Management Framework
 - (b) Management Oversight
 - (c) Quality of Practice/Assessments and Plans
30. In July 2017 the Board concluded that there were now satisfied that Children's Services had made the required improvements with regards to compliance as set out in the Improvement Plan.
31. It was agreed that a revised Improvement Plan would be produced which focussed on continued improvements and consistency in the quality of social work practice and that all future Board meetings would have quality assurance as the main agenda item.
32. Since July 2017 the Board has closely scrutinised audit findings and social work case studies, with a particular focus on direct work with children and families and the outcomes and impact of social work interventions.
33. The last two Independent Chair Reports, submitted to DfE following each Improvement Board, both stated that the Council were 'ready for inspection', adding that positive progress continued to be made.

Performance Management and Practice Improvement

34. The Ofsted monitoring visit letter, published following the fourth visit in June 2017 concluded that Performance Management and Quality Assurance arrangements were much improved, in particular inspectors noted that:
 - (a) Data was being used more intelligently to interrogate performance in monthly clinics that team managers attend. Exception reports were 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) attended six-weekly performance clinics with all Heads of Service, which was ensuring that senior leaders had comprehensive knowledge of what was happening at the front line, and how effectively children were helped and protected.
 - (b) There was a very recent improvement in the quality and frequency of performance information provided to Elected Members and the Scrutiny Committee. The more recent (April 2017) reports contained improved analysis and narrative, explaining the data.

35. 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.
36. In 2017 at the end of Quarter 2, 94% of single assessments were completed within a 45 working day timescale, exceeding the target of 90%, and also the 2016/17 year end performance of 93%. This performance also exceeds statistical neighbour average (89%), the regional average (82%) and the England average (83%).
37. By completing assessments in a timely way, children's needs are assessed and they 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 (Nov 17) audit of assessment undertaken found:

- There is management oversight recorded and social work activity demonstrates the journey of the family.
- Children were successfully returned to mother's care through the court process in a timely manner

38. There are no children who have been on child protection plans for more than two years since April 2017. These are all proxy indicators that evidence the positive impact of our work on improving outcomes for children that have been known to services.
39. Reviews are a key element in delivering Child Protection Plans and effective reviews should ensure the provision of good quality interventions. 100% of Child Protection reviews have been completed within timescale since April 2017.
40. In October 2017, 96.6% of child protection statutory visits were carried out within timescales and 99.5% of statutory visits to children who are looked after were carried out within timescales.
41. As Corporate Parents to our Looked After Children, work is ongoing to ensure that their care plans are of good quality and are based on an up-to-date assessment of their needs.

Example of Good Practice

One young person who has been looked after for a number of years in one of our in house Residential Homes in Darlington has been successful in stabilising his education which has had a positive impact on his relationships with his family.

Following an updated assessment, the plan is for him to be rehabilitated home.

42. The timeliness of Initial Health Assessments (IHA) that are completed when a child becomes looked after has significantly improved since 2016/17. As at 2017/18 quarter 2, 88% of children and young people had their IHA within 20 days,

compared with 54% in 2016/17. Close monitoring continues to ensure sustained progress. The number of children having up to date health reviews and dental checks continues to be a focus to ensure further improvements.

43. Improvements on monitoring of educational progress of children looked after have been made. Embedding the ePEP system and collaborative relationships with the Virtual School Head (VSH) and Designated Teachers have improved this area. The School Behavioural Partnerships helps to stabilise children within their immediate school and any change of provision is managed robustly and in the child's best interests.

Example of Success as at Dec 2017

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

Provision

Post 16 College with Further Ed = 9
Post 16 college sixth form = 1
Post 16 school year 12 = 0
Training/study programme = 2
Special independent = 1
NEET (Parenting) = 2

Feedback from Children, Their Families, Staff and Partners

44. Use of the Signs of Safety model is ensuring the workforce move from a compliance to a learning culture, giving more scope to social workers to exercise professional judgement in deciding how best to help children and their families. Work continues, to embed the model and associated tools further and to ensure improved consistency in use and application.
45. Consultation with children and their families is crucial in service delivery to ensure we are meeting need appropriately. Direct work with children continues to improve and is helping to evidence what children are saying, ensuring their voices are heard and taken forward. Tools available as part of Signs of Safety promote positive outcomes for children, as well as improved relationships between practitioners and families, and the use of these continue to be promoted.
46. Evidence of direct work is increasingly within children's case files, an example of which is a small key chain designed with a number of cards attached and using child age appropriate language, this booklet helped a social worker explain to a small child of 7 why he had to be with foster carers and could not be with his mother due to her having to go into hospital, e.g.



47. The Annual Social Work Health Check survey is a requirement following the 2009 Social Work Task Force, whose aim was to develop standards for social work employers and this included a '**health check**' process for assessing practice conditions. The 2017 Health Check was undertaken across all social work services, and within children's services it identified many positive messages:
- (a) Staff report they have manageable caseloads, with 88% advising that in the last 12 months this had not gone over the agreed limit
 - (b) Staff reported that they feel supported and have regular good quality supervision
 - (c) Staff have support in making complex decisions
 - (d) Staff feel confident that their practice is evidenced based and 79% regularly access Community Care for research to inform practice
 - (e) There is good access to senior managers
 - (f) Overall, 97% of Children's social workers in Darlington said they feel enthusiastic about their job and look forward to going to work

Sufficiency of Children's Services Social Work Workforce

48. Since the last report to Cabinet, significant progress has been made in relation to improving the sufficiency and stability of the Children's Services Social Work Workforce.
49. As at December 2017, the qualified social work workforce (not including senior managers at service manager and head of service level) consisted of 85.1 FTE funded establishment, of which 11 FTE were vacant posts. The overall vacancy rate was 13% - which shows improvement from 29% at the end of October 2016.
50. The continued commitment to maintaining manageable caseloads (maximum 18 children per social worker) and promotion of the specific Darlington offer provides a unique aspect within ongoing recruitment campaign, which has resulted in seven experienced external appointments made to posts up to Team Manager in the last four months.
51. The workforce drive has also encouraged appointments of 10.94 FTE agency workers into permanent posts across the Assessment and Safeguarding teams, Children's Access Point Team, Looked After Through Care Team and Independent Review Team.
52. All agency workers appointed to permanent posts have in excess of four years post-qualifying experience, which has had a positive impact on the level of post-qualifying experience in teams, in particular, the front line social work teams.

53. The rate of agency social workers covering vacancies as at December 2017 has reduced to 13% of establishment. This is a significant reduction from 32.1% as reported in the annual DfE Data Collection 2016 which provides annual benchmarking.
54. DfE Annual Data Collection 2016 (which benchmarks national data as at 30 September 2016) showed an equally high turnover rate of 33.7% YTD. Whilst the YTD turnover rate at December 2017 was 14.5%, this reflects the workforce changes in the last 12 months. However, it is already positively showing a downward trend, which is expected to continue over the next two years following the introduction of the Social Worker Recruitment and Retention Scheme.
55. In the last 12 months, the number of new starters (32) has exceeded the number of leavers (22) and these levels will continue to be reviewed to ensure that the above retention scheme is effective in reducing turnover whilst the efforts to recruit to vacant posts continue.
56. The local authority has taken specific actions during recent months aimed at promoting Darlington as an employer of choice for social workers, which includes:
 - (a) A social media campaign via Community Care
 - (b) Changes to the flexi-scheme, based on feedback provided by staff, affording more flexibility to social workers
 - (c) Roll out of revised career progression scheme to all social work teams
 - (d) Introduction of a recruitment and retention scheme for social workers in front line teams, identified as difficult to recruit.
57. The Director leads the regional initiative aimed at promoting the North East as an attractive place for experienced social workers to relocate to, branded as 'Put Your Heart into Social Work in the North East'. As part of this work, Darlington and all other NE Council's attended the May 2017 Compass Social Work Fair in Manchester and in London in November, with the final event planned in Birmingham in March 2018.
58. The North East Workforce Group continues to be led by the Director of Children and Adults Services. Recent achievements include significant work to address ongoing issues relating to the costs and quality of agency workers. A key success has been the agreement to standardise rates paid for agency workers, thus minimising churn across all NE councils, with signed commitment through a Memorandum of Understanding, which includes a robust escalation route should any Council not adhere to the agreement.

Training and Staff Development

59. Training and Staff Development has continued to be an essential element of Darlington's journey towards continuous improvement. Building on the 2016 training programme, 'Consolidating Good Practice', staff have engaged in further

bespoke training 'Aiming for Excellence' during 2017. This updated programme supports and responds to Audit findings, as well as listening to the opinions of staff and managers regarding their views on their training requirements (via Leadership Forums/Children's Services Forums).

60. Some of the 2017 headline training areas recognised via Training Needs Analysis and Audits include:
- (a) Signs of Safety – Training and Implementation
 - (b) Leadership, Management and Supervision development
 - (c) Effective writing and case recording
 - (d) Listening to Children / Voice of the Child
 - (e) Chronologies – consistency/quality/best practice
 - (f) Assessment and Analysis Training
 - (g) Communicating with Children Training
 - (h) Working with Boys, Men and Fathers Training
 - (i) Care and Permanence Planning – SMART Training
61. A new 'Introduction and Induction' tool has been designed to support Children's Services. The tool brings together key information to a central, easy to access repository. It ensures processes, policies, practice and standards are in one place, in an easy to follow format for new and existing staff. This will give standardisation and consistency to the application of policy and process into practice across the service. The tool is available for all staff via the Intranet.

Next Steps

62. To move on from achieving compliance to a culture of learning, robust quality of and evidence based practice, the following continue to be the priority actions:
- (a) Continue to sustain momentum embedding improved high quality social work practice across all teams
 - (b) Continue to embed Signs of Safety as a solution focused strengths based approach for children's services.
 - (c) Continue to deliver a robust Audit and Quality Assurance Programme, to effectively monitor practice improvement and drive up social work standards
 - (d) Further embed training and learning activity to meet the continued development needs of the workforce.