

**CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
21 AUGUST 2023**

QUALITY ASSURANCE - DARLINGTON OWNED CHILDRENS HOMES

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. To update scrutiny committee on our review of service assurance in place for Darlington owned Children’s Homes, share improvement opportunities identified and action being taken to strengthen confidence in this area.

Summary

2. The review was prompted by an inadequate rating of services for one home last summer.
3. The review highlights opportunities to improve quality management processes in place to ensure there is more continuous assurance of service performance to regulatory quality standards.
4. The review did not explore how any homes are currently operating or measure services therefore this report is not an assessment of or intended to infer assessment of service quality or performance in any of Darlington’s homes.

Recommendation

5. It is recommended that scrutiny note the work completed to review service assurance and the proposed action plan for improvement.

Christine Shields

Assistant Director Commissioning, Performance & Transformation

Crime and Disorder	No implications arising from this report
Health and Wellbeing	Supports the strategy to improve the health and well-being of children and young people
Carbon Impact / Climate Change	No implications arising from this report
Diversity	No implications arising from this report
Wards Affected	N/A
Groups Affected	Looked after children and care leavers
Budget and Policy Framework	N/A
Key Decision	No
Urgent Decision	No
Council Plan	Supports priorities for children and young people
Efficiency	Supports efficient use of resources and service improvement
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	Impacts Looked After Children and Care Leavers

MAIN REPORT

Context

6. Darlington owns four children's homes, one offering short term care for up to five children with sensory impairment and / or learning / physical disabilities, the others each providing three placements for children with social, emotional, or behavioural difficulties. We are in the process of mobilising a fifth service to offer outreach and in reach support with residential short break and emergency provision.
7. Registration requirements for children's social care in England are provided for in The Care Standards Act 2000; services must comply with a set of regulations to become, and stay, registered. The Children's Homes (England) Regulations 2015 set out nine quality standards, each having a child-focused outcome statement and underpinning, measurable requirements that homes must achieve.
8. Compliance with these standards is monitored by Ofsted as the regulatory authority for Children's Homes in England. They inspect services by The Social Care Common Inspection Framework (SCCIF) using a four-point judgement scale (outstanding, good, requires improvement to be good and inadequate) based on the overall experiences and progress of children, considering; how well children are helped and protected (limiting judgement); the effectiveness of leaders and managers (graded judgement). The regulations also provide for monitoring and reviewing arrangements, which must, at a minimum include appointing an independent visitor to visit the home at least monthly (The National Youth Advocacy Service or NYAS are contracted to provide this service in Darlington homes); for the Registered Manager to review quality of care in the home at least bi-annually and an annual review the location of the home to make sure it is both suitable and appropriate in the context of protecting children and young people.
9. Ofsted found one of our homes 'inadequate' across all domains last summer, a decline from three years of 'Good' judgements. A few months earlier, two of our other homes were rated 'Requires improvement to be good' for the second year running, having previously been rated 'Good' between 2017 and 2019. (Appendix B)
10. These judgements led us to question whether we confidently understand service standards in our homes, prompting a review of the quality assurance in place. A task and finish group (including representation from operational management, residential homes, commissioning, contracts, practice quality and young people's participation) was established in November 2022 to review:
 - a. How we plan for and ensure services are designed to achieve outcomes and meet the principles for residential care as set out in The Guide to the Children's Homes Regulations and The Children's Homes (England) Regulations 2015 ("the Regulations").
 - b. How we apply, manage, and provide assurance on the Quality Standards that homes are required to meet to achieve overarching outcomes set out in the Regulations.
 - c. How we learn from and respond to Inspection findings and recommendations, including sharing lessons learned across services.

11. The review captured current activity, sought feedback from young people living in our homes and facilitated a future focus session to identify barriers to understanding quality and opportunities for improvement.

Information and Analysis

12. The review explored quality management processes currently in place around four components for effective quality assurance; planning, monitoring, assurance, and improvement.

Quality Planning

13. The Children's Homes Regulations and associated quality standards are understood, registered individuals and management are clear about their roles and there are policies, processes and procedures in place designed to meet regulatory requirements.
14. There is an opportunity to improve how we plan for meeting quality standards by developing a service plan connecting service delivery to the quality standards and the evidence of outcomes in the inspection framework. This will clarify expectations, define what needs to be measured and monitored to demonstrate outcomes and articulate how services meet and evidence quality standards, including how we use regulatory monitoring effectively. It will also help us demonstrate good self-awareness, actively promote standards, and give homes the tools to constructively challenge (where appropriate) if this is being questioned or to confidently acknowledge gaps and talk about related actions or decisions.

Quality Monitoring

15. Regulatory quality monitoring is in place together with established compliance and operational management checks capturing a snapshot of services at a given point in time and identifying corrective action required to address any specific issues identified. Monitoring and Inspection reports contain detailed text specific to the areas of focus at the time of the visit or review and are shared in the original format with operational management and key stakeholders. A limited summary of this information is reported through performance clinic and in practice learning reports.
16. The service quality planning improvements noted at 2.1 will enable us to identify what we need to do to effectively measure performance and develop our monitoring processes to improve how we use information intelligently to detect emerging themes, identify issues before they impact service quality or outcomes and prioritise efforts. We will also have better visibility of good practice and grow an environment where quality promotes and informs improvement. With improved monitoring information we can review where this is reported and the most appropriate governance structure for service performance moving forward.
17. The views and involvement of young people living in homes and the impact of services on their progress is one of the main quality principles threading through the quality standards and currently captured through regulatory monitoring and inspection feedback.

18. There is an opportunity to reflect on how participation is achieved and the impact on developing services evidenced although the complexities of making significant progress in this area are acknowledged and thought will need to be given to progressing this without losing the principle through a monitoring process.
19. Contract management of in-house services has been light touch historically, tracking regulatory visits and inspections, including the recommendations and completion of associated actions although primarily as a recording function.
20. There is scope to use commissioning and contract management expertise to support in house services better whilst acknowledging there is a difference in this relationship to that of managing external providers.
21. As a paid for service, it seems there is scope for proactively contract managing the Independent Monitoring Service on some occasions, for example where reports are not clear and / or key contacts are not established over several visits.

Quality Assurance

22. Currently the best indicator of service quality is previous performance via a look back to the findings and judgement of the most recent Ofsted Inspection for an individual home.
23. With improved quality management processes in place there is an opportunity to capture confidence in service performance on a continuous basis and report this through a high-level dashboard report.

Quality Improvement

24. Improvement actions are agreed and taken forward from specific recommendations in monitoring / inspection reports.
25. With better quality and performance information we will be able to drive a systematic approach to learning and improvement, continuously developing practice and improving outcomes.

Recommendations

26. Review and agree the most appropriate governance for quality performance of in-house service provision.
27. Support homes to develop a simple plan to build quality requirements into service delivery, including participation and involvement of young people and identify how outcomes will be met and measured.
28. Support homes to develop a good quality monitoring process (including how regulatory monitoring contributes to this) and tools for meaningful analysis / reporting.
29. Support homes to develop a Quality Assurance Dashboard demonstrating how services are

performing.

30. Support homes to adapt and use quality management processes to help inform, plan and develop services.
31. Support homes as required to take forward wider actions identified in the future focus session. (Appendix D)