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**UPDATE ON CHILDREN'S SERVICES IMPROVEMENTS AND OUTCOMES OF  
SINGLE INSPECTION FRAMEWORK RE-INSPECTION**

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

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

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**SUMMARY REPORT**

**Purpose of the Report**

1. The purpose of this report is to provide an update to Cabinet on the outcome of the Single Inspection Framework (SIF) re-inspection conducted during February and March 2018.

**Summary**

2. Following publication of the SIF report, on 1 September 2015, which found Children's Services in Darlington to be inadequate, Cabinet has received regular progress reports regarding the improvement journey. The most recent update was presented to Cabinet on 6 February 2018.
3. Ofsted subsequently carried out a full four week SIF re-inspection of Children's Services between 26 February and 22 March 2018.
4. Ofsted published their findings report on 21 May 2018 (**Appendix A**), which cites considerable improvements since 2015, which are detailed in the main body of this report. The report concluded that overall Children's Services in Darlington have improved considerably from a position of inadequate in 2015 to now being requiring improvement to be good.
5. Ofsted made recommendations for the continued improvement of children's services.
6. Within the overall judgement, Ofsted concluded the following three graded domain judgements and two sub domain judgements:
  - (a) Children who need help and protection – **Requires improvement to be good** (Inadequate at 2015 inspection).
  - (b) Children looked after and achieving permanence – **Requires improvement to be good** (Requires improvement to be good at 2015 inspection).

- (i) Adoption performance – **Good** (Good at 2015 inspection)
- (ii) Experiences and progress of care leavers – **Good** (Good at 2015 inspection)
- (c) Leadership, management and governance – **Requires improvement to be good** (Inadequate at 2015 inspection).

## **Recommendation**

7. Cabinet are recommended to note:

- (a) the findings of the SIF re-inspection of Children's Services
- (b) the revised inspection regulation framework that the Council is now subject to
- (c) that an improvement plan will be developed in response to the recommendations

## **Reason**

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

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

## **Background Papers**

- (i) Darlington Childrens 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
- (vii) Ofsted – Re-inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers, published 21 May 2018

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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 implications for ensuring that children have the best start in life
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

### Ofsted Inspection Process

9. Ofsted carried out a four week SIF re-inspection of Childrens Services in Darlington between 26 February and 22 March 2018. Inspectors examined the experiences of children and young people who have needed or still need help and/or protection. This also included children and young people who are looked after and who are leaving care. The SIF re-inspection did not focus on the effectiveness of the Local Safeguarding Childrens Board.
10. The focus of the inspection was to consider the quality of work and the difference that children's services make to the lives of children, young people and families. Inspectors reviewed case files, observed how professionals work with families and each other and talked directly to young people about their experiences. Inspectors also tested the extent to which the authority understood about its own performance and the impact of leaders and managers.

### Inspection Findings

11. Ofsted judged that Childrens Services in Darlington require improvement to be good. The progress from a judgement of inadequate in 2015 was noted as a considerable achievement, pivotal to which was dynamic leadership, effective political and corporate support and significant resourcing of the improvement journey.
12. The overall judgement is based on three graded domain judgements and two sub domain judgements:
  - (a) Children who need help and protection – **Requires improvement to be good** (Inadequate at 2015 inspection).
  - (b) Children looked after and achieving permanence – **Requires improvement to be good** (Requires improvement to be good at 2015 inspection).
  - (c) Adoption performance – **Good** (Good at 2015 inspection).
  - (d) Experiences and progress of care leavers – **Good** (Good at 2015 inspection).
  - (e) Leadership, management and governance – **Requires improvement to be good** (Inadequate at 2015 inspection).
13. Ofsted Inspectors reported the following specific findings (quoted from the report):
  - (a) It has been a considerable achievement for the Local Authority to have improved the services that were judged to be inadequate at the previous inspection in 2015, whilst sustaining the quality of those services that were judged to be good
  - (b) Leadership and governance have markedly improved. Senior leaders know the services, quality of social work practice and improvement priorities well
  - (c) Pivotal to the improvement is the effective political and corporate support, including significant resourcing

- (d) Corporate and political oversight and scrutiny are now effective and social care performance management is well developed
- (e) The Council is a committed Corporate Parent, working closely with and acting on the views of the active and influential 'Darlo Care Crew', it engages partners effectively and prioritises council resources to support and improve outcomes for children who are looked after
- (f) Strategic and operational partnership working is generally well developed and effective
- (g) Persistent and wide ranging approaches have successfully improved workforce stability, capacity and development
- (h) No children were found in situations of unassessed or unmanaged risk, and a relentless focus on compliance has ensured that children are seen promptly and regularly
- (i) When children and families need help, they get the right service and when children are at serious risk of harm partners work together well and quickly to make sure they are safe
- (j) Social workers see children regularly and know their wishes and feelings

14. Inspectors also reported that the following areas needed continued improvement (quoted from the report):

- (a) The quality of practice and management oversight require improvement to be consistently effective. Assessments are too descriptive, lack analysis and clarity about what needs to happen next to ensure that work with families progresses quickly
- (b) Whilst children who are in care get good educational support, their progress and attainment at Key Stages 3 and 4 needs to improve
- (c) Some children have too many moves of placement. The matching of children with foster carers, the training of an information sharing with the carers is not sufficiently developed to consistently support placement stability, especially for children with complex needs
- (d) Children become looked after in response to a crisis, in some cases opportunities for a more planned approach are missed. Edge of care services are not sufficiently developed to provide a timely response for all those families whose children may become looked after

15. **The experiences and progress of children in need of help and protection** was judged to require improvement to be good. Ofsted reported that tangible progress had been made since the 2015 inspection, where this domain was judged to be inadequate, and that:

- (a) Where children are at risk of significant harm there is a prompt and co-ordinated response to ensure their immediate safety
- (b) There have been significant improvements in the timely completion of assessments, with these being in line with the needs of the child and better than comparator authorities
- (c) Good examples of direct work with children were seen
- (d) Services to disabled children are timely, child centred and well-co-ordinated

- (e) Responses to children who are at risk of sexual exploitation and who go missing are timely and well-co-ordinated
- (f) The LA is tenacious in locating children who are missing from education, and has highly effective systems to keep track of those pupils who are electively home educated and to ensure that they are safeguarded
- (g) The assessment and provision for homeless 16 and 17 year olds is prompt and effective

16. Continued improvement is required in:

- (a) Quality of critical challenge by frontline managers and by Independent Reviewing Officers
- (b) Stronger analysis within assessments
- (c) Further development of edge of care services
- (d) An evaluation of the effectiveness of early help

17. **The experiences and progress of children looked after and achieving permanence** is judged as having sustained requires improvement to be good from the 2015 inspection. In particular Ofsted noted that:

- (a) Children who are looked after live in good quality placements, and are well supported to maintain contact with their birth families and to pursue leisure interests
- (b) The local authority has addressed the concerns from the previous inspection regarding the inappropriate use of Section 20, and this is now applied appropriately
- (c) Social workers know their children well, see them alone, and they complete meaningful direct work with children
- (d) The conclusion of care proceedings are timely
- (e) Chronologies for Court are of good quality
- (f) Children's emotional health and wellbeing is enhanced through a range of support and activities
- (g) The virtual school head has engaged with schools and colleges effectively and strengthened systems to track and support the education of children who are looked after
- (h) The Darlo Care Crew is an energetic group with clear views about their care and how services can be improved. They meet with Corporate parents regularly

18. The sub judgement areas of **adoption performance** and **experience and progress of care leavers** are also part of this domain. These are also reported to have sustained judgements of good. Ofsted noted:

- (a) Leadership and management of the adoption service is strong
- (b) Performance of the adoption service has improved in the past 12 months
- (c) Children whose plans are for adoption are identified without delay and placed promptly within adoption placements
- (d) Children are at the centre of adoption work
- (e) The service for care leavers has further developed since the last inspection

- (f) The authority is in touch with all of its care leavers
- (g) Individual risks to care leavers are clearly identified, including those at risk of child sexual exploitation and support in place to reduce risks
- (h) Care leavers have good relationships and receive positive support from personal advisers
- (i) A range of accommodation options are available for care leavers, with prompt flexible support and advice too. There is sufficient choice and availability, which means that care leavers rarely wait for accommodation
- (j) The proportion of care leavers in education, employment and training is better than in comparator authorities, they live in safe accommodation and are fully aware of their entitlements

19. Continued improvement is required in:

- (a) The terminology used in letters before proceeding so that parents are clear about what needs to change
- (b) Assessments and plans need to be clear and succinct
- (c) The time taken for special guardianship arrangements and long term fostering matches to be ratified
- (d) Further stabilise placements
- (e) Improve the training, assessment and support offered to foster carers and the quality of short-term placement matching
- (f) The timeliness of review health and dental assessments
- (g) The attainment of children who are looked after at Key Stage 4
- (h) Improve effectiveness of managers and IRO oversight and challenge to improve the quality of practice and to ensure work is progressed in a timely way

20. **Leadership, management and governance** was judged to require improvement to be good. Ofsted reported that the management of Childrens Service is now much more rigorous and effective, where previously this domain was judged to be inadequate, and that:

- (a) The Chief Executive Officer and Lead Member work well together with the Director of Children and Adults Services, they are well informed and the lead member is persistent, tenacious and well able to assert herself
- (b) Senior managers and leaders know themselves and their services well
- (c) Significant progress has been made with regards to statutory compliance
- (d) Elected Members have invested judiciously in Childrens Services
- (e) Governance arrangements are robust, having been strengthened and strategic partnerships are refreshed and revitalised
- (f) Scrutiny committee now provides effective challenge, and the LSCB now provides strong and effective leadership across the partnership
- (g) Senior managers and leaders have had significant success in stabilising the workforce, which cannot be underestimated and is pivotal to practice improvements that have been seen. Workforce development is strong. Staff talk very positively about the professional development and training opportunities that are available

- (h) The volume and quality of performance management information has improved significantly since the last inspection, the LA is well on its way to developing a comprehensive performance culture
- (i) Senior managers have taken decisive and appropriate action to address poor performance
- (j) Social workers and managers are motivated and feel valued, morale is good

21. Continued improvement is required in:

- (a) Strategic planning that focuses on measurable activities designed to improve outcomes for children, young people and families
- (b) The development of a more fluid, dynamic, partnership based and regional approach to commissioning
- (c) The development of a systematic quality assurance framework
- (d) A whole system approach needs to be taken to implementation of the Council's chosen practice framework

22. The recommendations contained within the inspection report will be taken forward through a newly developed Improvement Plan, which will be submitted to Ofsted.

### **Next Steps**

23. As Childrens Services are now judged to be requires improvement to be good, intervention activity from Ofsted will cease. The DfE Improvement Board has ceased, as has the Independent Chair and the six monthly reviews. A light touch monitoring process will remain in place, in line with all Council's that improve from an inadequate judgment. The DCAS is in discussion with the DfE Link Officer regarding how this will take place.

24. The Council is now subject to inspection regulation under the Inspection of Local Authority Childrens Services Framework (ILAC), which replaces the SIF. This is a three year programme designed to be proportionate and more continuous in nature by way of an ongoing dialogue with the Council to assess performance rather than relying on a single inspection in a three year period. For Council's judged as requires improvement to be good, the programme (over a three year period) consists of:

- (a) An annual engagement meeting with Ofsted; this is based on the Council's own self-evaluation, previous inspection findings, the broader issues affecting children's services, and is used to inform themes for subsequent focussed visits. A letter confirming the outcome of the engagement meeting will be sent to the Council but it will not be published.
- (b) Up to two focused visits, which involve two day visits with Inspectors onsite, looking at one or more aspects of service, themes or cohorts of children. Findings from visits are published but graded judgements are not made.
- (c) A possible Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI), which would replace a focussed visit, which is a multi-agency inspection of a specific themed area, with findings published.

- (d) One standard two week inspection, which will cover the full range of Childrens Services. Graded judgements are made on the four point scale of inadequate, requires improvement to be good, good and outstanding.