

23 October 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 20 and 21 September 2017. This was the fifth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in September 2015. The visit was carried out by Tracey Metcalfe, Her Majesty's Inspector and Fiona Millns, Ofsted Inspector.

Since the last monitoring visit, good progress has been made in improving services for children and young people who are looked after.

### **Areas covered by the visit**

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the experience and progress of children looked after, with a particular focus on:

- planning for permanence
- the quality of children's plans
- management oversight
- the effectiveness of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs).

A range of evidence was scrutinised and considered during the visit, including: children's records in the safeguarding, looked after and through care teams (LATC); interviews with social workers and managers; and audit activity. In addition, inspectors spoke to service managers, heads of service and scrutinised a wide range of performance information and documentation.

## **Overview**

New and improved systems track children's progress from when they become looked after. Improved focus on permanence by the child's second review is beginning to reduce drift and delay. As a short-term measure, children are now being accommodated appropriately under Section 20. Senior managers' oversight of the Public Law Outline (PLO) has improved. This is helping social workers to navigate the pre-proceedings phase more effectively and is resulting in children's cases being put before the family court promptly.

Workforce stability has greatly improved. Children are experiencing fewer changes of social worker. Compliance with statutory requirements has been achieved. Managers now need to develop a more robust self-assessment and improve focus on the quality and consistency of practice. The quality of assessments and plans is not yet good enough. Managers and IROs are not consistently ensuring that assessments are updated or thorough, which means that care plans do not reflect the children's current needs well enough.

## **Findings and evaluation of progress**

Senior managers show improved understanding and prioritisation of service strengths and areas for development, with appropriate emphasis being given to achieving permanence and reducing drift for children. Staff are being better supported to reach the right decision within a timeframe that meets the child's best interests.

A thorough review of all children subject to Section 20 arrangements has taken place. Children are being accommodated under Section 20 appropriately and in the short term. A permanence tracker has very recently been developed and is overseen by the head of service. All children's plans seen by inspectors during the visit had a recorded permanence decision or plan by the second review.

The head of service oversees the progress of all children looked after and those children in the pre-proceedings stage through a PLO tracker. This is facilitating more robust scrutiny of permanence decisions. The principal solicitor monitors children's progress from the letter sent before the proceedings stage and throughout the proceedings. This is contributing to reducing delay in achieving legal permanence for children. Care proceedings are currently concluding within 26 weeks.

A placement stability strategy has been developed and its implementation is being monitored robustly by the head of service. This is leading to some very early improvement in relation to short- and long-term placement stability and a reduction in the numbers of children living more than 20 miles from their home.

Workforce stability has greatly improved. All social workers and managers in the LATC are now permanent. There is a high level of engagement by senior managers with social work teams. This is engendering a culture and environment in which staff feel supported to invest in the service and develop skills and competencies. Children

are experiencing fewer changes in social worker and are better able to develop positive relationships with them. Caseloads are more manageable and have reduced on average to 18. New technology is supporting agile working. This is helping social workers to focus more on direct work with children and their families.

A more stable workforce has resulted in improved compliance. Social workers and their managers are now receiving regular supervision. Social workers told inspectors that their managers are approachable and they maintain an open-door policy. Social workers are able to access informal supervision as and when needed. They report that senior managers are highly visible and supportive. This is contributing positively to staff retention and recruitment.

Now that statutory requirements have been complied with managers need to develop a more robust self-assessment process and improve focus on the quality and consistency of practice. Inspectors found that children's specific needs and circumstances are not always thoroughly explored during their assessment. Some assessments lack multi-agency input. Research is not used enough to inform evidence-based analysis about the best plan for the child. This means that care plans are not always focused on the right things or by the right professionals.

The IRO service has been strengthened with the appointment of a permanent quality assurance manager. This team is now fully staffed and there is a permanent team of IROs. Caseloads are well managed, providing IROs with the capacity to fulfil the statutory functions of their role. The service is now achieving 100% compliance in relation to holding timely reviews. Wherever possible, and subject to the children's wishes, the IRO is consulting with them prior to their review. Now that compliance is assured, IROs need to focus on ensuring that the care plans reflect the children's current needs and that the wishes and feelings of the children are fully considered. The IRO role in monitoring and challenging the local authority's overall performance as corporate parents is beginning to improve. More emphasis now needs to be placed on ensuring that the impact of their scrutiny results in improved outcomes for children.

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**