

Darlington

Inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers

Inspection date: 27 February 2018 to 22 March 2018

Report published: 21 May 2018

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| Children's services in Darlington require improvement to be good | |
| 1. Children who need help and protection | Requires improvement to be good |
| 2. Children looked after and achieving permanence | Requires improvement to be good |
| 2.1 Adoption performance | Good |
| 2.2 Experiences and progress of care leavers | Good |
| 3. Leadership, management and governance | Requires improvement to be good |

Executive summary

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 while sustaining the quality of those services judged to be good. Leadership and governance in Darlington have markedly improved. Pivotal to this improvement is the dynamic leadership of the director of children's and adult services (DCAS) and effective political and corporate support, including significant resourcing, for the improvement journey.

Senior leaders know the services, the quality of social care practice and improvement priorities well and have responded promptly to findings on this inspection. Corporate and political oversight and scrutiny are now effective and social care performance management is well developed. The impact of early help services has not been evaluated by the local authority.

Quality assurance processes have also improved, but require further development to continue to support practice improvement more effectively. Strategic plans are aspirational but are not supported by clear and concise action planning. This does not best support the need to increase focus on quality, pace and coordination of improvements.

Persistent and wide-ranging approaches have successfully improved workforce stability, capacity and development, particularly during the last six months. These have underpinned practice improvements. However, the impact of too many changes of social worker for children in Darlington is still evident.

No children have been found in situations of unassessed or unmanaged risk. A relentless focus on compliance has ensured that children are seen promptly and regularly. Immediate and acute risk is identified and responded to effectively. The timescales for completing assessments are in line with the needs of the child, are better than comparator authorities and reviews are undertaken within statutory timescales.

However, the quality of practice and management oversight require improvement to be consistently effective. The majority of assessments are too descriptive, are not analytical and do not effectively underpin planning. They are not updated in a timely way and some pre-birth assessments are not completed in time to allow for considered planning and action. Plans do not clearly identify important areas of focus and outcomes, what actions are required by whom and by when, and there is insufficient detail of how progress will be measured. This can mean that families are not clear about what is expected of them. The strategic implementation of the chosen practice framework has not yet been effectively embedded across the service.

Child protection conferences and statutory reviews for children looked after are timely. First line management oversight is evident but neither independent reviewing officers (IROs) nor managers are consistently effective in providing critical challenge about the quality of work or ensuring timely progression. This is particularly evident

where children have been suffering from neglect and interventions under the public law outline (PLO) should have been initiated sooner.

Strategic and operational partnership working is generally well developed and effective. Strategic priorities are appropriately aligned and responses to children at risk of sexual exploitation and who go missing are effective. There is effective oversight of children who are electively home educated, missing from education or receiving alternative provision. However, information from multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARAC) is not sufficiently integrated within social care records for the local authority to be assured that all actions are in place to protect the child.

The majority of children become looked after in response to a crisis, and while those decisions are appropriate at the point at which they become looked after, in some cases opportunities for a more planned approach to care were missed. Edge of care services are not sufficiently developed or well-coordinated to provide a consistent and timely response for all families whose children may become looked after.

The council is a committed corporate parent, working closely with and acting on the views of the active and influential 'Darlo Care Crew'. Chaired by the chief executive, the panel engages partners effectively and prioritises council resources to support and improve outcomes for children looked after.

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. The virtual school headteacher (VSH) has engaged schools and colleges effectively and has strengthened the systems to track and support the education of children looked after. Outcomes for pupils in key stages 1 and 2 are improving and are better than the national average for looked after children, but improving progress and attainment at key stages 3 and 4 remains a priority for the local authority.

Some children have too many moves of placement, although recent strategies to reduce these have shown some impact at the time of inspection. The matching of children with foster carers and the training of and information sharing with the carers is not sufficiently developed to consistently support placement stability, particularly for children with complex needs. Health needs of children looked after are not consistently assessed or reviewed in a timely way.

The quality of the adoption service for children has been sustained and is good, responsive and timely. However, alternative permanence options for children are not pursued as effectively. Life-story work is not consistently completed with all children looked after.

Good-quality support and outcomes for care leavers have also been sustained, with a high proportion in education, employment and training and most living in safe and suitable accommodation. Care leavers are very positive about the help they receive from their personal advisers.

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Information about this local authority area¹

Annex A: Information about the local authority area

Previous Ofsted inspections

- The local authority operates four children's homes. Three were judged to be good and one judged outstanding in their most recent Ofsted inspections.
- The previous single inspection of the local authority children's services was published in September 2015. The judgements for the local authority were:
 - Overall effectiveness: inadequate
 - Children who need help and protection: inadequate
 - Children looked after and achieving permanence: requires improvement to be good
 - Adoption performance: good
 - Experiences and progress of care leavers: good
 - Leadership, management and governance: inadequate.

Local leadership

- The director of children's services (DCS) has been in post since December 2015.
- The DCS is also responsible for education services, adult services and public health services.
- The chief executive has been in post since August 2005.

Children living in this area

- Approximately 22,519 children and young people under the age of 18 years live in Darlington. This is 21% of the total population in the area.
- Approximately 22% of the local authority's children aged under 16 years are living in low income families.
- The proportion of children entitled to free school meals:
 - in primary schools is 18% (the national average is 15%)
 - in secondary schools is 15% (the national average is 13%).
- Children and young people from minority ethnic groups account for 6% of all children living in the area, compared with 21% in the country as a whole. The

¹ The local authority was given the opportunity to review this section of the report and has updated it with local unvalidated data where this was available.

largest minority ethnic groups of children and young people in the area are Mixed/Multiple ethnic group and Asian/Asian British.

- The proportion of children and young people with English as an additional language:
 - in primary schools is 7% (the national average is 21%)
 - in secondary schools is 5% (the national average is 16%).

Child protection in this area

- At 31 December 2017, 779 children had been identified through assessment as being formally in need of a specialist children's service. This is a reduction from 838 at 31 March 2017.
- At 31 December 2017, 89 children and young people were the subject of a child protection plan (a rate of 39 per 10,000 children). This is an increase from 69 (31 per 10,000 children) at 31 March 2017.
- At 31 December 2017, two children lived in private fostering arrangements. This is an increase from none at 31 March 2017.
- In the two years before inspection, three serious incident notifications had been submitted to Ofsted and no serious case reviews had been completed.
- There is one serious case review ongoing at the time of the inspection.

Children looked after in this area

- At 31 December 2017, 222 children are being looked after by the local authority (a rate of 98 per 10,000 children). This is an increase from 220 (97 per 10,000 children) at 31 March 2017. Of this number:
 - 89 (40%) live outside the local authority area
 - 41 live in residential children's homes, of whom 66% live out of the authority area
 - no children live in residential special schools
 - 153 live with foster families, of whom 38% live out of the authority area
 - 18 live with parents, of whom 22% live out of the authority area
 - no children are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- In the last 12 months:
 - there have been 20 adoptions
 - 13 children became subject of special guardianship orders
 - 88 children ceased to be looked after, of whom 3% subsequently returned to be looked after.

The practice framework used in this area

Signs of Safety.

Recommendations

1. Improve and accelerate the focus on quality. Ensure that strategic plans clearly identify measurable actions to support quality, timely implementation, coordination and evaluation. Further develop the range and focus of quality assurance processes to effectively monitor and support practice improvement.
2. Improve the quality of assessments and plans to ensure that analysis effectively identifies the impact of risk on children, the areas for intervention, including the child's identity needs, and that the outcomes required are specific and measurable and that contingency plans are clear.
3. Ensure that clear assessment guidelines are in place and followed, including for pre-birth assessments, and that chronologies accurately reflect the impact of significant events in children's lives.
4. Ensure that the implementation of the social work practice framework is well planned and aligned with developments in the case management system.
5. Improve the effectiveness of managers' and IROs' oversight and challenge to improve the quality of practice and to ensure that work is progressed in a timely way, including the timely initiation of work under the PLO.
6. Continue to reduce the number of changes of social workers in order for children to develop more positive relationships with adults who can support them consistently and progress their plans.
7. Ensure the effective coordination of information from MARAC meetings and that actions are clearly recorded on children's case records and that they are implemented.
8. Develop and coordinate more timely services for families whose children are on the edge of care.
9. Develop a shared understanding of permanence to ensure that all permanence options are considered with equal urgency and attention.
10. Reduce the number of placement moves for children looked after and improve the training, assessment and support offered to foster carers and the quality of short-term placement matching.
11. Improve the educational progress and attainment at key stages 3 and 4 for children looked after.
12. Improve the timeliness of annual health assessments and dental checks to ensure that the health needs of children looked after are identified and met.

13. Ensure that direct work, including life-story work, is completed with all children looked after, to help them understand their history and origins and why they do not live with their birth families.
14. Evaluate the effectiveness of early help services to understand impact and to inform future developments.

Summary for children and young people

- Services for children and young people in Darlington have improved since the last inspection in 2015.
- Senior managers have worked very hard to make sure that there are more good social workers who stay in Darlington and that children have fewer changes of social worker. This has improved recently, but still needs to be better.
- When children and families first need help, they do get the right service, and when children are at serious risk, social workers, police and other professionals work together well and quickly to make sure that children are safe.
- Social workers see children regularly and know their wishes and feelings.
- The assessments and plans that social workers write can be difficult to read and are not always clear about what needs to happen next. Some of the work is not done quickly enough.
- Social work managers and IROs need to support social workers better to make sure that all work is completed as quickly as it should be.
- Children who are in care live in good-quality homes, although some children move too often.
- Children who are in care get good support for their education. However, progress for children in secondary school needs to improve.
- When the plan is for children to be adopted, they get a very good service and are adopted quickly.
- When children are going to live with other families until they are grown up, such as in long-term foster care or under special guardianship orders, these arrangements are not made quickly enough.
- The Darlo Care Crew represents young people in care well and makes sure that their views are heard and acted on by senior managers.
- Young people who leave care get good support and live in suitable accommodation, and care leavers are helped effectively to be involved in education, employment or training.

| The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection | Requires improvement to be good |
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| <p>There has been tangible progress since the last inspection and no children were found in situations of unassessed or unmanaged risk. However, further work is required to build on improvements in relation to the quality of social work practice and management oversight.</p> <p>Children and families are directed to the appropriate services in a timely way. Where children are at risk of significant harm, there is a prompt and coordinated multi-agency response to ensure their immediate safety. The quality of early help support from partner agencies is variable. The overall effectiveness of early help has not been evaluated by the local authority and therefore its impact is not fully understood.</p> <p>There have been significant improvements in the timeliness of completing assessments, although some pre-birth assessments are completed too near to the time of birth to allow for considered planning with, and preparation for, parents. The majority of assessments are too lengthy and descriptive, lacking clear analysis. This makes it difficult to determine the critical issues and impact on the child. Most written plans lack clear priorities of what needs to change, how this will be achieved and within what timescale. This does not support effective planning and the timely progress of work.</p> <p>Good examples of direct work with children were seen. Some children have experienced repeated changes of social workers and this makes it difficult for them to develop and maintain meaningful and trusting relationships, and for consistent and timely support to be offered.</p> <p>Although there is evidence of regular management oversight on case records, the quality of critical challenge by frontline managers and by child protection conference chairs is not always effective in driving progress and improving the quality of social work practice. As a consequence, decisive and timely action is not always taken when children are experiencing neglect.</p> <p>Services to disabled children are timely, child centred and well-coordinated.</p> <p>The local authority's edge of care services are not sufficiently well developed and coordinated.</p> <p>Responses to children who are at risk of sexual exploitation and who go missing are timely and well-coordinated. The assessment and provision for homeless 16- and 17-year-olds is prompt and effective, with young people having access to a wide and appropriate range of accommodation, provision and support.</p> | |

Information from MARAC meetings is not sufficiently integrated in social care records for the local authority to be assured that all actions are in place to protect the child.

Inspection findings

15. A broad range of services are available to support children and families at an early stage. The early help performance framework was not implemented at the time of the inspection and so the local authority is not able to evidence the impact of the work. Partner agencies need to further engage in this work. (Recommendation)
16. Early help assessments completed by local authority services are of good quality and reflect children's views, but the quality of assessments undertaken by partner agencies is more variable. Families are stepped up appropriately to social care when early help is not improving the circumstances for children.
17. The children's access point (CAP) provides an effective multi-agency response. Thresholds are appropriately applied, which means that children receive a timely response in line with their needs. The local authority consistently ensures that parental consent is sought to share information and offer services. In cases where it has not been possible to obtain consent, the service manager chairs 'no consent' meetings to ensure relevant information is obtained to determine the best way forward.
18. Where children are identified as being at risk of significant harm, work is passed immediately to the first response team, and there is a safe and effective response. Strategy discussions and child protection investigations are timely, and decisions about how to proceed are appropriate. Risks and protective factors are clearly identified and carefully analysed.
19. Effective arrangements are in place through the Tees Valley area out-of-hours service (OOH), ensuring that children are safeguarded out of office hours. There are positive working relationships between the OOH team and social work teams. Information sharing is timely and case recording up to date and thorough.

20. Assessments are timely and some good quality assessments were seen. However, the majority contain too much description and are not sufficiently analytical. They are not always clear about what needs to change, parental capacity for change and timescales for these changes to happen within. This makes it difficult to determine the critical issues and any impact on the child. Assessments are not routinely updated when the child or family's circumstances change. Chronologies are poor. They do not effectively identify the impact of significant events in the child's life and do not inform assessments and ongoing work. However, chronologies submitted to court are of good quality. (Recommendation)
21. A small number of pre-birth assessments were not initiated or completed in a reasonable time before birth, meaning that plans and actions were rushed and parents and practitioners were not sufficiently well prepared. Senior managers responded promptly to these findings and initiated appropriate immediate and longer-term actions.
22. Children's written plans do not consistently and clearly identify key issues. Most are not specific or measurable. The plans do not make it easy for parents to make sense of what they need to achieve by when and what will happen if change is not secured. (Recommendation).
23. Children are seen by their social workers and in most cases they are seen alone. Social workers use a range of tools to engage with children, with some very good direct work being undertaken. While the child's views are clearly expressed, it is difficult in some cases to gain a sense of the child, what life is like for them and how their experiences have informed the assessments and plans.
24. Some children have had too many changes of social worker, which means that they do not have the opportunity to develop trusting relationships in which they can confidently share their views. In some cases, frequent changes of social worker have contributed to a lack of continuity, resulting in some delay in progressing the work with the child and family. (Recommendation)
25. Although there is regular management oversight of case records, the quality of critical challenge provided by team managers and advanced practitioners is not always effective in securing necessary change for children and improving the quality of practice. Changes of line manager have impacted negatively on timely decision-making for some children because there has been a lack of consistent oversight on cases. (Recommendation)
26. All child protection reviews are held within timescale. An observed initial conference identified relevant issues effectively, but IROs are not consistently offering constructive challenge by subsequently ensuring timely progression of plans for children or supporting practice improvements. (Recommendation)

27. While some children received excellent intensive support enabling them to remain appropriately cared for in their families, edge-of-care services are not sufficiently well developed and coordinated to consistently provide preventive services and improve outcomes for all children who may enter the care system. The local authority does not identify in a timely way children and young people who would best be supported through edge-of-care provision. (Recommendation)
28. The life stages team has responded comprehensively to findings from a previous monitoring visit and all disabled children within that service now receive thorough and timely reviews. Children's views are elicited through a range of tools and methods and clear analysis of all the information effectively supports recommendations. Services to disabled children are at the appropriate level of intervention, with prompt responses to requests for advice or service and thorough and timely assessments effectively informing subsequent planning. Workers understand the needs and complexities of the children well, and work with partner agencies is well coordinated.
29. The practice framework is not consistently and effectively used by social workers and partner agencies. Where it is applied well, risks, needs and goals are clearly analysed and articulated. However, in some cases, the model is used in a mechanistic way, for example with risks and strengths being recorded in list format and a lack of professional evaluation about how strengths can be used to mitigate risk. (Recommendation)
30. The response to children who go missing from home, care and education, and those who have been, or are at risk of being, sexually exploited is prompt, effective and well-coordinated. Timely return home interviews (RHIs) are undertaken by a dedicated missing from home family worker and the local authority is tenacious in locating children who are missing from education. Information is shared effectively and data is carefully analysed to identify trends, patterns, hotspots and risky individuals or groups and to inform appropriate protective action. Levels of risk are regularly reviewed for individual children, and all of this ensures that children are safeguarded and protected.
31. The local authority has developed highly effective systems to keep track of those pupils who are electively home educated and to ensure that they are safeguarded. The cases of those deemed to be at risk of harm are reviewed by a multi-agency group and a swift response is coordinated. This includes joint home visits by police and children's services to ensure children's safety. School nurses enable children who are electively home educated to access necessary medical services. Work with schools has ensured that parents have access to suitable information to inform their decisions about home education. There is robust partnership oversight of children who receive less than 25 hours of education, ensuring that they are safeguarded. Bespoke packages effectively support engagement with education, plans for reintegration to school and moves to post-16 provision.

32. The assessment and provision for homeless 16- and 17-year-olds is prompt and effective. Good partnership working is evident between the local authority and the housing team. Young people are advised of all options available to them and they have access to a wide and appropriate range of accommodation, provision and support.
33. MARAC arrangements are effective at addressing risk, but information sharing within the local authority is reliant on conversations between the social worker and the person who is nominated as the single point of contact. Key information from MARAC meetings are not recorded on the local authority children's case records or integrated into the child's plan. This means that important information is not readily available to, for example, out of hour's staff or social workers, and managers and the local authority cannot assure themselves that relevant actions are implemented. (Recommendation)
34. The local authority's designated officers ensure that prompt and effective action is taken when allegations are made against professionals or persons in positions of trust. This ensures that children are safeguarded. However, case progress is not always monitored in a timely way, although this has not left children at risk, and decisions about outcomes are made jointly with appropriate partner agencies. Work to engage faith communities other than Christian groups has not been effective.
35. Children who are living in private fostering arrangements receive a prompt assessment of their needs, and subsequent visits are regular. However, there is insufficient focus on the capacity of and requirements of the carers. In the very small number of currently open cases, no written plans were in place. The local authority responded promptly to the inspection findings, ensuring that identified deficits were addressed.

| The experiences and progress of children looked after and achieving permanence | Requires improvement to be good |
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| <p>Services for children looked after continue to require improvement to be good, as at the last inspection, although good services for children who are adopted and for care leavers have been sustained and further improved. There is some effective social work practice, but there are a number of areas which are not yet good, such as assessments, planning, management oversight and challenge. As a result, there is delay for some children in securing permanence and ensuring that children’s needs are thoroughly understood and addressed. Despite this, children looked after live in good-quality placements where their welfare is safeguarded.</p> <p>At the point of becoming looked after, decisions for children are appropriate, but for some children the approach to care should have been more planned, including through earlier care proceedings. The conclusion of care proceedings is timely.</p> <p>Social workers know children well and they regularly see them alone. However, children have too many changes of social worker, which means that trusting relationships are fragmented and plans are delayed. Social workers work well with other professionals and carers to address risks such as child sexual exploitation and going missing.</p> <p>Children whose plans are for adoption are identified without delay and placed promptly with adoptive families. The timeliness of responses and the quality of the work undertaken with children and adopters is good. Equal emphasis is not afforded to all permanence options as some children are waiting too long for special guardianship orders or long-term fostering matches to be secured.</p> <p>Some children have too many placement moves, although strategies developed to mitigate this have started to show impact. Although initial health assessments are improving in timeliness, the ongoing review and monitoring of children’s health needs are not effective for all children, particularly in relation to annual health assessments and dental checks. Children’s emotional health needs are well supported.</p> <p>The VSH has engaged schools and colleges effectively, and strengthened the systems to track and support the education of children looked after. Outcomes for pupils in key stages 1 and 2 are improving and are better than comparators, but there is a declining trend in attainment for children looked after at key stage 4.</p> <p>Care leavers report positively on relationships and support from personal advisers. The proportion of care leavers in education, employment and training is better than in similar authorities, they live in safe accommodation and are fully aware of their entitlements.</p> | |

Inspection findings

36. Decisions made for children to become looked after are appropriate, but some children enter care in response to a crisis rather than in a planned way. The lack of an established edge-of-care service makes this more likely. In most cases, when risks escalate, weekly legal planning meetings track and monitor children effectively through pre-proceedings and, if necessary, through the court process. However, in some cases, proceedings should have started sooner because of parents' lack of co-operation with professionals or continuing high-level concerns. Some of the terminology used in letters before proceedings means that parents are not always clear about what needs to change, and the potential consequences of their lack of engagement are not clearly articulated. (Recommendation)
37. Once care proceedings have been initiated, cases progress in a timely manner and the vast majority are concluded within an average of 26 weeks. The district judge and Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service (Cafcass) have both noted an improvement in the quality of the work since the last inspection. Overall, they believe that the right cases are being brought at the right time, but also recognise that some applications to court should have been made sooner and this has meant delays in securing permanence for some children.
38. The local authority has addressed the concerns from the previous inspection regarding inappropriate use of section 20. Regular monitoring has meant that numbers have reduced and the local authority's figures are now in line with comparators. Section 20 is now applied appropriately, with legal proceedings being initiated where necessary to progress permanence planning for children. This is a positive response to previous concerns raised.
39. Most of the children who return home do so after a thorough assessment and with a period of social work support. In a small minority of cases, children returned home without a written assessment being completed. Social workers have provided support but, without a detailed and analytical assessment, the support is not as focused as it could be.
40. Social workers know children well. Statutory visits are timely and children are seen alone. Children told inspectors that social workers listen to them, and the child's voice is evident in most cases seen. Social workers complete purposeful direct work to help children understand their histories and their complex relationships, but this is not evident in all cases. Life-story work is often started too late and some children who have been looked after for several years told inspectors that they did not know what life-story work was. This means that not all children have full and accurate information regarding their history and origins and why they do not live with their birth family. (Recommendation)

41. Too many children experience too many changes of social worker. The Children in Care Council, known as the Darlo Care Crew, told inspectors this was its main concern. Although workforce stability is improving, some children reported having four or five changes of social worker in the past year and they did not like repeating their story when changes occurred. Such changes do not help children to build trusting relationships with professionals who they should be able to rely on for help and support. Frequent changes of social workers also mean that plans are interrupted and not progressed as swiftly as they should be. (Recommendation)
42. Children looked after are informed about advocacy and advocates, independent visitors, rights and entitlements by a participation officer when they first enter care. They use these services and the advocates ensure that the children's views are heard. Children know how to complain. Where there have been changes of social worker and where independent visitors are involved, the independent visitors have provided consistency of support for those children.
43. The quality of assessments is variable, with most lacking a thorough exploration of a child's circumstances, as well as the relevant views of children, parents and other professionals. Chronologies lack details of significant events and there is a tendency to describe rather than analyse findings. In most cases, there is a lack of attention paid to diversity and in particular the child's lived experience and the impact of separation, loss and attachment. Assessment guidelines are contradictory, meaning that assessments are not always up to date or refreshed when significant changes occur. (Recommendation)
44. Fostering assessments and some long-term matching documents are not of a consistently good quality as they provide insufficient scrutiny of carers' abilities to meet complex needs now or in the future. Other assessments are of a better quality. For example, together/apart assessments and child permanence reports are comprehensive. Connected persons assessments and special guardianship order (SGO) reports seen are thorough and clearly written. SGO support plans are also sufficiently detailed.
45. The variability of assessments results in a similar inconsistency of good-quality plans. Social workers know what the plan is but the written plans are overly detailed and complicated. Plans lack specificity of what needs to change, how this will be achieved and within what timeframe. Contingency plans are similarly vague. (Recommendation)

46. Equal emphasis is not afforded to the range of permanence options. Although children are living in good-quality placements, there are delays in confirming these as permanent homes. Unlike the urgency paid to adoption, children wait too long for special guardianship arrangements or long-term fostering matches to be ratified. During the inspection, the local authority changed its policy and agreed that children over the age of 12 will also be formally matched. Some of these children have been placed for many years but not had their security and sense of belonging enhanced by a formal match. (Recommendation)
47. Managers' and IROs' oversight of practice has not significantly improved since the last inspection. Although child looked after reviews are timely, there is a lack of rigour and urgency to progress plans or challenge practice concerns. IROs lack a shared understanding of what needs to be challenged and how to progress this to best effect change. Case supervision is not always regular or sufficiently focused on ensuring that tasks are completed or relevant to the work being undertaken. (Recommendation)
48. Some children experience too many placement moves. The local authority has recognised this and the placement stability strategy has shown some impact. Short-term stability is gradually improving, but is still below comparator local authorities, and long-term stability for children living in placements for two or more years has not shown sustained improvement. (Recommendation)
49. The local authority has been slow in developing a commissioning and sufficiency strategy to meet the needs of children looked after. Only recently has it developed a recruitment and marketing strategy for foster carers and it has failed to reach its net target of additional foster placements during the last year. However, the vast majority of children are being placed close to home and within 20 miles of their home address.
50. Foster carers are not always given the right preparation and support to help them maintain placements for children. Although positive regarding the training offered, foster carers noted that training does not always equip them to deal with complex needs and behaviours. Foster carers commented that they do not always receive sufficient information when children are placed. This was borne out by the lack of rigour seen in short-term placement matching. Referrals lack accurate and up-to-date information and it is not clearly evidenced how carers will meet a child's needs, how gaps will be addressed, and why this is a suitable match. Foster carers also reported that delegated authority arrangements are not always clear, and there is a lack of dedicated out of hours support for them. Overall, this lack of attention to good placement matching and support is not conducive to ensuring placement stability. (Recommendation)

51. Foster carers and other professionals work well together to understand risks and meet children's needs. For example, attention is paid to ensure that any risks associated with family contact are known and addressed. Foster carers noted how well schools manage incidents of bullying.
52. The general health needs of children looked after are not adequately addressed. The timeliness of initial health assessments is much improved, but too many children who are looked after do not have a timely annual health assessment or dental check. This means that the local authority cannot be assured that those children's health needs are being effectively identified, addressed and monitored. (Recommendation)
53. Children's emotional health and well-being is enhanced through a range of support and activities. In response to waiting times for child and adolescent mental health services, the local authority has employed two therapeutic social workers to support children's emotional health and development. Some family placement workers are trained in therapeutic approaches that also support placements. Foster carers support children in a range of hobbies and interests and take children on outings and holidays. Children are encouraged to attend outdoor activity holidays with their peers and all children looked after and foster carers have free leisure and activity cards to use locally.
54. The VSH has strengthened the systems to track the individual circumstances and achievements of children looked after. Consequently, the local authority has a much clearer picture of the outcomes of this group of pupils. This is enabling the VSH to identify the right priorities for improvement. For example, schools have been challenged regarding fixed-term exclusions, which has resulted in a reduction in their numbers, and the quality of personal education plans is much improved. Better relationships with designated teachers and recent training on early childhood trauma are leading to improved understanding of the needs of children looked after.
55. Education outcomes for children looked after at key stages 1 and 2 are improving and compare favourably to national averages for children looked after. Improving attainment outcomes for children looked after by the end of key stage 4 is a recognised priority for the local authority. While progress is beginning to improve in key stages 3 and 4, the VSH is aware that this is not yet strong or consistent enough to ensure that all children achieve well. (Recommendation)
56. The Darlo Care Crew, Darlington's children in care council, is an energetic group with clear views about their care and how services can be improved. Children meet with corporate parents regularly and have reviewed and strengthened the 'Pledge', which is a set of promises that the council has made to all children in care. The children are involved in a range of activities, including working with IROs to revise consultation documents to encourage all children looked after to have their voices heard.

The graded judgement for adoption performance is that it is good

57. Children whose plan for permanence is through adoption receive a good, responsive and timely service. Children who need an adoptive placement are identified without delay and are placed with their permanent families promptly. The service is particularly good at placing older children for adoption. Nearly a third of the children placed with their permanent families during the past year are children aged five and over. It is more difficult to find permanent homes for this age group.
58. Leadership and management of the adoption service is strong. Areas of strength and areas for development are well known. Performance is well monitored and a detailed action plan is in place to progress improvements to the service. Quality assurance processes include evaluations by the agency adviser from information provided to the family placement panel. This information is used in individual staff supervision, personal development reviews and team training to improve practice.
59. Performance of the adoption service is good and has improved in the past 12 months. Performance data for the service demonstrates timelier outcomes for children and adopters and is better than statistical neighbours and England averages in all of the three key adoption scorecard measures. This performance has been sustained and improved since the last inspection against a background of instability and in spite of the imminent move to a regional adoption agency.
60. The stability, experience and dedication of the social workers provide continuity and rigour in both the recruitment and training of adopters as well as in finding good permanent homes for children. Children are at the centre of adoption work in Darlington.
61. Recruitment and training for adopters is good. Adopters feel well supported throughout by their individual social workers. Social workers are encouraging and sensitive to prospective adopters during the rigorous assessment process. The comprehensive training package, which includes adoption preparation training, bespoke training, access to foster care training and wider local authority training, ensures that adopters are well prepared and can meet the diverse needs of children well. In addition, the service ensures that there is no delay in the assessment of adopters, as training opportunities from other Tees Valley local authorities can be accessed.

62. Adoption support, including that from the adoption support fund, is responsive and well planned. The process is handled sensitively, with the needs of children paramount. The majority of applications for support are made to fund the provision of psychological assessments and resulting plans for trauma and attachment therapy. This support is invaluable, and ensures that children's needs are well understood and that adopters have the right skills to meet the needs of children. As a result, disruptions are minimised and placements of children with their permanent families maintained. The adoption service also has access to in-house therapeutic social workers, who provide a timely and responsive service to support children.
63. Effective support is also available to birth parents through a commissioned service which provides independent support to birth families, including arrangements for final contact sessions, meetings with prospective adopters and Darlington's Post Box service.
64. The family placement panel is well established and effective. Attendance is consistently good. The panel chair and panel members are well trained and bring a diverse range of experience and knowledge to their role. Challenge from panel members is evident and seen to be improving in rigour. The agency decision-maker reports are appropriate and timely, and records increasingly demonstrate professional curiosity. This ensures that children and adopters receive a timely, well-considered, responsive service.
65. Reports and assessments completed by social workers are overall of good quality and have been fundamental to the success of the service in finding permanent adoptive families for children and in the stability of these placements. Prospective adopters' reports and child permanence reports are timely, detailed and analytical, providing a holistic assessment of prospective adopters and children. Where appropriate, these are sometimes complemented by well-considered 'Together/Apart' assessments, to consider whether it is in the best interests of brothers and sisters to live together. Family finding is further strengthened because the process of finding permanent adoptive families is undertaken by the social worker who has already been involved with the children in their previous placements. Consequently, the profiles of children that are produced for the prospective adoptive families by the social workers are comprehensive and insightful.
66. Comprehensive life-story work for adopted children is completed by the children's social workers and is provided in time for placement with their permanent families. Children's later-life letters are generally well written and sensitively describe the reasons why children were adopted and the rationale for the decisions made. However, there are examples of children's social workers using professional jargon within letters without providing explanation of the terminology. This could be confusing even when the children are older and read the letters.

67. If there are no in-house adopters suitable to meet the needs of the child, a referral is made to the Adoption Register England and Link Maker, and there is close liaison with other local authorities to ensure the timely identification of an adoptive placement for children. Adoption exchange days are also used well, especially for those children for whom it is harder to find a permanent family. Family finding is timely and from 1 April 2017 to 30 September 2018, just one child was referred to the Adoption Register.
68. Disruption rates are low and when they occur, independent reviews are undertaken and learning is shared within teams, with the family placement panel and with individual social workers in order to inform and improve practice.

The graded judgement about the experience and progress of care leavers is that it is good

69. The service for care leavers has further developed since the last inspection, and positive action has been taken to respond to almost all areas that were identified to improve in June of 2015. The improvements have gained pace in the last eight months and in some areas very recently. These are benefiting care leavers to varying degrees.
70. The local authority is in touch with all of their care leavers. This contact is meaningful and the frequency of contact and visiting is based upon care leavers' needs. The local authority is determined to maintain relationships with all young people and adults and is preparing to extend services to include those care leavers aged up to 25. The service is currently making contact with all those care leavers who have previously left the service and, to date, a number of care leavers over the age of 21 years have re-engaged with the service and are receiving some level of support.
71. Care leavers spoken with say they are happy with the support they receive from the service and they feel positive about their relationship with their personal adviser. Overall, they feel listened to and cared about. Care leavers say that they feel consulted with and involved in planning. The members of the care leavers' forum, for example, have revised and designed the information for care leavers, contributed to the website and are making suggestions for further improvements to the offer for care leavers. Forum members are also being consulted on suggestions for a new location for the service.

72. Care leavers are well informed about their entitlements, they know their rights well and these are clearly accessible on a dedicated care leaver page of the council website. The offers include access to driving lessons and an exemption from council tax for those on low incomes, including waiving council tax debt for all those care leavers up to 25 years old from 1 April 2018. Care leavers are given their important key documents promptly when they leave care. The delays in providing care leavers with their health histories has very recently been resolved, and these are also compiled and retained for the few care leavers who say they do not want them.
73. The established personal advisers know young people extremely well and they have long-standing relationships with each other. A care leaver spoken with said, 'I know all the team, so there is always someone I can speak to.' Personal advisers focus on the needs of care leavers and use their relationships effectively to support them in line with plans.
74. Pathway planning for most care leavers is effective, and supported by a recent improvement in written pathway plans. The plans are personal to care leavers and their views are well reflected and central to planning. One care leaver, reflecting the views of others, said, 'It's an opportunity to discuss and think about things.' The plans include a clear history and analysis of needs, and identify the potential for, or actual, risk. A small number of pathway plans were less effective when young people were not willing to engage or re-engage with partner agencies. Care leavers' ethnicity and identity is not always well reflected, although workers were able to discuss this more fully than plans showed.
75. Individual risks to care leavers, including those at risk of child sexual exploitation, are clearly identified, their needs are understood and the necessary support is provided to reduce risks. Care leavers are supported to think about their choices and to keep safe. Personal advisers increase their visits, at times to daily visits, to support those care leavers in crisis. The manager knows all the care leavers' presenting risks and uses individual supervisions effectively to guide personal advisers on how best to support young people.

76. A range of accommodation options with prompt, flexible support and advice is available for care leavers in Darlington. There is sufficient choice and availability, which means that care leavers rarely wait for accommodation. When care leavers experience difficulties with or in their accommodation, prompt action is taken to find solutions before these escalate. Wherever possible, care leavers are supported to live close to family members. The addition of 'taster flats' located close to children's homes helps care leavers transition to independence and stay close to their support networks. The number of care leavers remaining with their foster carers post-18 years, known as 'staying put', continues to be a positive and well-promoted option. A small number of care leavers are currently detained and receiving appropriate support from the service. Care leavers said that they feel safe where they live and like the locations.
77. Care leavers who are, or about to become, parents, receive good support, including examples of tailored provision, to assist them to learn parenting skills and safely care for their child.
78. Care leavers said that they get good support to access education, employment and training. This is a continuing success story in Darlington as the proportion of care leavers in education, employment and training continues to rise and is above local and national comparators. This is achieved through effective partnerships and a clear focus on individual care leavers when they disengage or are experiencing difficulties. There are creative and bespoke packages commissioned where care leavers had not previously engaged in other options. The council has been too slow in providing in-house apprenticeships, but three are now planned for later in 2018. Care leavers who attend university are well supported.
79. The achievements of care leavers are formally celebrated through an annual 'vibe' event, activities during national care leavers' week and, for example, a mini celebration for care leavers recently completing a bronze award in performing arts. Individual letters are sent throughout the year to acknowledge care leavers' achievements. Care leavers spoken with said that they value the birthday meals with their personal advisers when they are 18 and 21. Care leavers were also very positive about the recently introduced weekly food box scheme, initiated with local partners. This has been set up to provide workers with opportunities to engage with young people, particularly those who are reluctant, and it helps care leavers to manage their finances, purchase unexpected items or budget for a social event.

| Leadership, management and governance | Requires improvement to be good |
|---|--|
| <p>Senior leaders have accepted and responded to the painful lessons from the last inspection and have ensured that the management of children’s services is now much more rigorous and effective. Significant progress has been made, particularly with statutory compliance, but senior leaders and managers recognise that there is still some way to go to improve quality, consistency and challenge and to ensure that services for children and families are good.</p> <p>Elected members have invested judiciously in children’s services. Governance arrangements have been strengthened and strategic partnerships have been refreshed and revitalised. The level of scrutiny and critical challenge is much improved and effective. The ‘family firm’ initiative is evidence of the council’s commitment to act as a good corporate parent.</p> <p>Senior managers have had considerable success in improving recruitment and retention. Workforce development is strong. The local authority now has fewer vacancies, is less reliant on agency staff and is starting to attract experienced social workers. Staff turnover has reduced considerably. However, families have yet to feel the full benefit of increased workforce stability. Strategic plans are general rather than specific, and there is very limited detailing of specific or measurable planning and activity. This does not support effectively an increased focus on quality or an acceleration of the pace of improvement. The early help strategy has been re-launched, but early help is not yet fully developed or effectively evaluated. Edge-of-care services are underdeveloped.</p> <p>Commissioning is undergoing a transformation. There is a great deal of purposeful activity going on. However, in the interim, the local authority is not consistently making best use of its resources. The local authority knows that it does not have the right mix of foster carers, and this shortfall contributes to too many placement moves for some children.</p> <p>The volume and quality of performance management information has improved markedly. Senior leaders now have a much clearer line of sight on practice and performance. They know what is happening at the front line. Practice compliance has improved significantly, but there is room for further improvement. In some service areas, managers still rely on manual tools to track performance.</p> <p>The local authority uses case management audits to identify areas for improvement, but the quality assurance system is under developed. Team managers and IROs are not consistently providing high-quality critical challenge. The quality of assessments and plans is still not good enough.</p> <p>Senior managers responded promptly to inspection findings, initiating immediate actions where appropriate.</p> | |

Inspection findings

80. Senior managers and leaders know themselves and their services well. They are realistic about the size and scale of the challenges that they, and their staff, face but are ambitious for children and families. The chief executive and lead member work well together with the director of children's services, whose energy, enthusiasm and ability to involve and engage staff and partners is having a positive impact. The chief executive is well informed about, and has her finger on the pulse of, children's social care. The lead member is persistent, tenacious and well able to assert herself, as evidenced by her insistence on making sure that there are effective checks and balances in relation to the new regional adoption agency arrangements.
81. Governance arrangements are robust. The Children's Trust arrangements have been incorporated into the Health and Wellbeing Board (H&WB) and there are clear lines of accountability, and good communication, between the H&WB, the One Darlington Partnership Board, the Local Children's Safeguarding Board (LSCB), the Local Adults Safeguarding Board, the Corporate Parenting Panel and the Scrutiny Committee. By focusing on a small number of priorities for action each year, the local strategic partnership is able to demonstrate that it is having an impact on the lives of children, young people and families, including, for example, in relation to education, employment and training and domestic violence. The H&WB has actively embraced the Children and Young People's Plan.
82. The Scrutiny Committee now provides effective challenge. Members of the committee talk very positively about the in-depth training that they were required to complete and which taught them to be child-centred, gave them the confidence to be curious and enabled them to rigorously interrogate practice and performance. Increased transparency, and a much sharper focus on impact and outcomes, means that senior managers are robustly held to account.
83. Senior managers responded promptly to inspection findings initiating appropriate actions, for example in relation to private fostering and pre-birth assessments.
84. Key strategic partnerships have been refreshed and revitalised. Good working relationships with the police mean that there is an effective, joined-up response to child sexual exploitation and children who go missing from home, school or care, one that extends to children who are being electively home educated. There is effective engagement with the safeguarding agenda from education partners. More purposeful engagement with health services also has the potential to deliver better outcomes over time. The LSCB now provides strong and effective leadership across the multi-agency partnership.

85. Strategic plans outline general principles rather than focus on specific and measurable activities designed to improve outcomes for children, young people and families. This does not effectively support the local authority's need to increase the focus on quality and accelerate the pace of change now that statutory compliance in social work practice has been achieved. (Recommendation)
86. The local authority is in the process of moving from a traditional, conservative and largely reactive approach to commissioning to one that is more fluid, dynamic and based on multi-agency partnership working and regional collaboration. There is much purposeful and focused work, including with public health, to develop ward-level data in order to identify potential hot-spots, to try to avoid damaging placement breakdowns. There is also purposeful and focused work with health and education partners to develop a more cost-effective approach to the commissioning of therapeutic support services. However, the processes of and outcomes from commissioning need to be further developed. The early help offer has not yet been fully implemented, edge-of-care services are not fully developed and the local authority acknowledges that it is not consistently making best use of its own residential provision. A lack of sufficient local foster carers is also contributing to placement instability for some children. (Recommendation)
87. Chaired by the chief executive, and with close links to the Darlo Care Crew, Darlington's equivalent of the Children in Care Council, the corporate parenting panel is constantly challenging itself, its senior managers and staff and its partners to be good corporate parents. As a good corporate parent, the local authority pays for driving lessons for older children, continues to provide leisure cards for all children in care and their foster families, and has significantly reduced the number of care leavers who are not in education, employment or training.
88. The quality of performance management information available has improved significantly since the last inspection. Monthly performance reports provide a wealth of accurate and reliable data and complement the weekly exception reports which team managers and advanced practitioners use to monitor individual and team performance. With performance being discussed in supervision, team meetings, monthly performance clinics and quarterly assurance days, there is a much greater recognition, and sense of ownership, of the significance and importance of data. The local authority is well on the way to developing a comprehensive performance culture. As a result, compliance has improved considerably. Children are seen regularly and their needs are assessed within the relevant timescales and reviewed in a timely fashion. Most staff receive regular monthly supervision.

89. However, some managers are still having to use manual systems to monitor and track progress in key areas of activity. Despite the fact that this was one of the key recommendations made at the time of the last inspection, the early help scorecard is currently only available in draft, although the local authority report that it is at the testing stages of how it measures impact. Senior managers are able to track supervisory practice, but do not have a direct oversight of the number of changes of social workers that children and families have had, and continue to experience.
90. The local authority's approach to quality assurance is under-developed. Managers are spending a disproportionate amount of time and energy every month on case management audits, most of which tell them what they already know. They are not consistently making good, systematic use of a range of quality assurance methods to improve the quality of work, particularly where practice deficits are already known. This has had an impact on the pace of change and means that, with the exception of adoption and care leavers, the service that children and families receive is not always good enough. (Recommendation)
91. Team managers, child protection conference chairs, independent reviewing officers and advanced practitioners are not consistently providing the right level of critical challenge to improve the quality and timely progression of work. This is, in part, a legacy of the recent history of unmanageable and unsustainable workforce instability, when the focus was almost exclusively on compliance at the expense of quality. It also reflects the fact that a significant number of team managers and advanced practitioners are still relatively new to their current posts.
92. The local authority's chosen practice framework is undoubtedly beginning to provide some added value, but there has not been a whole-system strategic approach to its implementation, and the approach that it does have is not being consistently applied. Although most staff have completed the required two-day training, assessment and planning templates have not yet been updated to complement and support the framework. The way in which the framework is being applied indicates that some managers and staff are not entirely clear about how to use it to best effect. This has the potential to undermine effectiveness. (Recommendation)
93. The local authority takes children's complaints seriously. Learning from complaints is carefully analysed and incorporated into training. However, the timescales for responding to complaints are poor, meaning that complainants wait too long for a conclusion. It is too soon for the recently enhanced management oversight to have had an impact.
94. Good working relationships with Cafcass and the judiciary, at both a senior management and an operational level, have helped to reduce the average length of care proceedings and there is a shared understanding of the improving quality of work.

95. The significant success that senior managers and leaders have had in stabilising the workforce cannot be underestimated and is pivotal to practice improvements that have been seen. Since the end of June last year, the local authority has had a full complement of senior managers, including service managers, all of them in permanent posts. A range of initiatives have included setting a cap on social work caseloads, regrading team manager posts and introducing an advanced practitioner role. The DCAS has also led a regional strategy on consistent agency recruitment, which has also supported permanent recruitment. These initiatives have built capacity and created a clear career pathway, and the local authority has succeeded in tempting good-quality agency staff to apply for permanent posts and attracted experienced social workers to come to work in Darlington. This provides a strong base for further improvements.
96. Conscious of the need to ensure that they have the right calibre of staff, senior managers have taken decisive and appropriate action to address poor performance. They are equally conscious of the need to develop and support the ongoing professional development of their staff and managers. New members of staff, especially those who are in a position to compare Darlington with other local authorities, talk very positively about the professional development and training opportunities that are available through the developing Darlington partnership. Although the quality of supervision is variable, most staff receive regular monthly supervision, and the majority have had their first performance appraisal. Good use is made of range of different staff forums to disseminate information, develop two-way communication and generate a sense of ownership.
97. The local authority has been creative and imaginative in raising its profile and enhancing its reputation as an employer. The principal social worker is instrumental in helping to ensure that newly qualified social workers are, and feel, well supported. The North East Training Partnership has acknowledged Darlington's approach to practice educators as a best practice example. Events like the recent annual social work conference, with its impressive line-up of keynote speakers, are helping to ensure that social workers and their managers are motivated and feel valued. Morale is good.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences of children and young people who have needed or still need help and/or protection. This also includes children and young people who are looked after and young people who are leaving care and starting their lives as young adults.

Inspectors considered the quality of work and the difference adults make to the lives of children, young people and families. They read case files, watched how professional staff work with families and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care given to children and young people. Wherever possible, they talked to children, young people and their families. In addition the inspectors have tried to understand what the local authority knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the people who it is trying to help, protect and look after.

The inspection of the local authority was carried out under section 136 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

The inspection team consisted of six of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and two Ofsted inspectors (OI).

The inspection team

The inspection team

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