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Dear Suzanne Joyner

Focused visit to Darlington borough council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Darlington borough council children's services on 27 February 2019. The inspectors were Rachel Griffiths, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Neil Penswick, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors considered the local authority's arrangements for children who need help and protection, in accordance with the Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services framework. Specifically, inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need and those subject to a protection plan, including children receiving help and support from the disabled children service, the Life Stages team.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers, team managers and senior leaders. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

Overview

Darlington borough council children's services were last inspected by Ofsted in March 2018, when the overall effectiveness of the service was judged to require improvement to be good. Since then, a stable and committed senior leadership team, with strong political support, has been successful in establishing and maintaining a stable and motivated workforce. Leaders have a realistic understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement and this is reflected in their action plan. They recognise that there is more to do to ensure that the help

and support provided to all children in need of help and protection result in sustained improvements in their lives.

Performance data is comprehensive and quality assurance processes are showing signs of improvement. Performance reports and case records demonstrate that most children are seen regularly by their social workers, but are not always seen alone. Assessments continue to be completed within timescales set by national guidelines, and children's plans are regularly reviewed and updated. However, while social work practice is improving, the quality of assessments and planning remains variable and there is a lack of clarity in respect of the recording of consent to undertake assessments. The quality of direct work with children is improving, but is not always evidencing positive impact for all children. While social workers report that they feel well supported by their managers, supervision quality is not yet consistent or effectively progressing children's plans in all cases.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The consistency and quality of assessments and plans.
- The consistency and quality of direct work with children, including regularly seeing children alone.
- Clarity of recording in respect of the issue of consent to undertake assessments.
- Quality assurance, performance and audit processes focusing on the quality of practice and the impact that practice is having on children's lives.
- Management oversight and supervision.

Findings

- In urgent and high-risk situations, progress has been sustained. Children are seen quickly to ensure their safety. Strategy meetings, with appropriate input from partner agencies, further ensure that actions are taken to immediately safeguard children.
- Frontline management oversight is frequent but is not consistently providing clear direction or challenge to social workers. At the point of case allocation for an assessment to be completed, managers do not routinely provide social workers with clear guidance regarding the focus of the assessment and the timescale for completion. This runs the risk that not all children's needs will be considered.
- The quality of children's assessments remains variable and it is not always evident from the recording that consent for the assessment has been obtained or explained to parents. This is impacting on the quality of data in relation to whether children are seen during their assessment.

- Stronger assessments consider family histories, seek information from other agencies and fully involve children and families. However, some assessments overly focus on adult behaviours rather than the child's experience, and lack robust consideration of all risks to the child. For some children, this means that no further action is taken when there may be services that would be of benefit to them. Managers continue to authorise assessments rather than challenge the quality of them and then provide a rationale for the next steps. This hinders the child's progress and social work staff development.
- Children's plans are mostly detailed, but some overly focus on adult issues rather than what these issues mean for children. Too many plans lack clear actions and timescales, making it more difficult to monitor whether children's outcomes are improving and more difficult for families to know what needs to be done and by when.
- The timeliness of child protection conferences, core groups and child in need reviews continue to be sustained. Meetings take place regularly to review the progress of plans with multi-agency partners and parents. Waiting lists for specialist assessments and support, for example by the child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS), mean that some children are waiting too long for their individual needs to be assessed and met.
- Independent reviewing officers (IROs) have become more effective since the last inspection. They appropriately challenge social workers and team managers to help progress plans and reduce delay for children. When insufficient progress is being made, or if risk is increasing, children's cases progress swiftly into the public law outline (PLO) process. Letters before proceedings are much improved, providing parents with clarity about what they need to do to avoid legal action being taken to safeguard their children. This has enabled some children to safely remain living at home with their families.
- The quality of social work practice remains variable. Examples of stronger social work practice included social workers demonstrating professional curiosity and a good understanding of disguised compliance, which better safeguards children. Conversely, over-optimism was seen, including accepting parental self-reporting without fully analysing the complete range of information available. This leaves children at a greater level of risk.
- The quality of direct work undertaken with children is variable. Examples of stronger practice included social workers using a range of tools to ascertain what life is like for children. This informed their assessments and plans. However, while the vast majority of children in need are seen regularly by their social workers, they are not always seen alone. This reduces children's opportunities to share their independent views and experiences. When children are visited, the quality of the recording of visits varies significantly, from being comprehensive, and

providing a clear outline of what life is like for the child, to being extremely brief, and providing limited insight into how children are feeling.

- Although staff now receive regular supervision, managers are not yet consistently using this to steer case progression through the setting of clear and specific actions with timescales.
- Committed workers in the children with disabilities team (known locally as the Life Stages team) know their children well and have a good understanding of how their disability impacts on their lives. However, assessments of all social care needs are not always fully considered or regularly updated. Senior leaders acknowledge that there is more to do to improve the quality of assessments and plans.
- In January 2019, a newly established 'keeping families together' service became operational. It is providing intensive support to those children who are on the edge of care. To date, outcomes for children receiving this service have been very positive. It is, however, too early to see the full impact of the service.
- Since the last inspection, workforce stability has significantly improved. The vast majority of managers and social workers are now permanent and there is minimal reliance on agency staff, who are used only to cover maternity or sickness leave. Feedback provided by staff during the visit was unanimously positive about working in Darlington. Staff were very motivated and reported feeling well supported and valued by managers at every level. Staff feel listened to and appreciate the training opportunities available to them, which helps enhance their practice.
- Senior leaders closely monitor social workers' caseloads. While improved workforce stability is enabling some progress towards their stated target of 18 cases per social worker, they are yet to achieve this for all social workers. Advanced practitioners are currently carrying caseloads higher than desired due to increased service demand, which is reducing their capacity to support managers and to develop the skills of less experienced staff. Senior leaders are taking action to address this. In the interim, the principal social worker and service managers are providing additional support to social workers and team managers. This has minimised the impact of these capacity issues on service delivery and staff development.
- The revised performance management and quality assurance framework now includes regular learning audits, peer reviews, direct observations and feedback from parents and children. This is enhancing senior leaders' understanding of performance. However, it is not yet providing a good enough understanding of the quality or effectiveness of social work practice. Audits remain overly focused on processes and timescales rather than the quality of social work practice or what this means for children. This limits senior leaders' opportunities to influence practice improvement.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning your next inspection or visit. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Rachel Griffiths
Her Majesty's Inspector