

Inspection of Darlington local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 10 October to 21 October 2022

Lead inspector: Vicky Metheringham, His Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness	Good

Children in need of help and protection in Darlington Borough Council receive a good service. The quality of the support and care provided to children in care and care leavers is outstanding, and this is reflected in the extent to which they are cared about, feel listened to and are taken seriously and valued.

Children's experiences of social care have significantly improved since the last inspection, in 2018, where children's services were judged to require improvement. The group director of people and his leadership team have made steady and sustained progress to build a child-focused service which is providing effective help, protection and care to children and their families across all the levels of need, vulnerability and risk. Strong political support, challenge and accountability can be seen at every level, as well as how the local authority fulfils its functions as a corporate parent.

Senior leaders have a comprehensive understanding of the quality of practice and of the needs of children through an enhanced quality assurance and performance system. They use this to inform service delivery and make continuous improvements. This progress and the development of creative relational approaches to practice are modelled to staff through each layer of management. This is cultivating a culture of learning and an environment where good social work is thriving. Professionally curious and caring social workers undertake detailed assessments of children's

needs. However, burdensome workflow systems do not support the completion of timely assessments for all children.

What needs to improve?

- The timeliness of children and family assessments, to ensure that children receive the right intervention at the right time, needs to improve.
- The quality, recording and frequency of supervision provided for social workers needs to improve.
- Consistency of management oversight and decisions to be accurately recorded on children's records.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: good

1. Children and their families benefit from a well-designed early help offer. There is a consistent understanding and application of thresholds, and a shared focus on the child's needs and experiences between early help and statutory services. This is ensuring that children get the right level of help, at the right time.
2. Children benefit from a wide range of interventions from the 'Building Stronger Families' early help service. Workers build effective relationships with children and families and have a wide range of experience and skills. Detailed early help assessments contain all relevant information to inform appropriate and tailored multi-agency interventions. When children's circumstances change, well-embedded and responsive arrangements for step up and step down to children's social care enable a seamless transition of service provision for families. This is ensuring that children's experiences are considered, and that they receive the right level of support.
3. When children are referred into the Children's Initial Advice Team, they receive a timely and effective response which is proportionate to their level of risk and need. Partner agencies make appropriate contacts and referrals which demonstrate a sound understanding of the threshold for access to children's social care. They are clear and detailed, containing the necessary information to inform decision-making. Parental consent is consistently sought when relevant. Social workers engage in conversations with parents at the earliest opportunity, and they work with them to understand their worries and concerns. They also hold robust discussions with partner agencies so that families are directed to the right service at the right time. Social workers consider the family history, together with the presenting concerns. Confident and knowledgeable managers understand risk and provide consistent clarity and direction for social workers to enable them to make the right decisions.
4. Emergency duty staff are appropriate in their response to children's and families' needs out of hours. Referrals are passed promptly to daytime services, who ensure that follow-up action is taken when necessary.

5. When children need protection, strategy meetings take place swiftly and these are well attended by partner agencies. Information-sharing is detailed, and decision-making is appropriate, although some strategy minutes are overly long, which makes it difficult for the reader to understand the pertinent issues of concern. Leaders are aware of this and are working with managers to better record discussions and the subsequent outcomes for children. Resultant child protection enquiries are thorough, with a clear assessment of risk, followed by appropriate actions to safeguard children.
6. When child protection concerns are less obvious, current workflows require social workers to undertake lengthy assessments of need before a strategy meeting is triggered. While inspectors did not identify any child who was unsafe, or not receiving a protective service, for some children this delays the wider multi-agency discussion and information-sharing. In some cases, a strategy meeting is held during the assessment, which then triggers a further assessment of need. This practice is building in unnecessary delay for some families in the completion of their assessment and is creating additional and repeated work for social workers.
7. A relationship-based model of assessment and care planning is being developed and is embedding in social work practice. A strong emphasis is placed on workers building trusting relationships with children, their families and support networks. This is evident in some very effective early help interventions, child in need and child protection services. Workers maximise the use of local strengths and resources, including parents, extended family, family friends and community networks. Relationship-building is at the core of the current service design and is developing in service delivery. For a small number of children, social work practice is too adult-focused, and it does not allow for a full consideration of the impact on children of their parents' behaviour. This results in a small number of children experiencing multiple referrals for the same issue.
8. Assessments provide evidence of how historical factors about children and their families are taken into account and how they are fully analysed to understand families' strengths and risks. Social workers seek to understand the context in which children are living, the strengths of the family and their protective factors, as well as the risks children might be facing. When appropriate, the voice of the child is clear, and it informs assessments. The early and appropriate identification of the needs of unborn babies has been enhanced by increased management oversight and through well-embedded tracking and monitoring mechanisms. While assessments are completed within the local authority required timescales, most children's assessments take up to the limit of the maximum time allowed, many of which should be completed earlier for the child. Managers do not currently set timescales for assessment completion according to the child's level of need.
9. Children benefit from well-reviewed multi-agency plans that are specific to their needs. Plans are overseen by confident and knowledgeable managers who understand the quality and impact of practice. Children's plans provide detailed and realistic actions for parents so that they understand what is required of them and the support they will receive. Children's plans do not always contain

contingencies, but because of the relational approach, social workers are well able to articulate alternative planning should risks escalate.

10. Children and families benefit from effective family network meetings, together with family group conferences. Committed edge of care and family support workers provide intensive support and interventions to families. There are a wide variety of support services to better help and protect children. These include input from domestic abuse services, parental mental health and substance and alcohol services. Group work and individual specialised interventions are also provided for children to support their needs.
11. Visits to children are undertaken regularly in accordance with their plan and flex appropriately when needs change. Persistent visiting to harder-to-reach families creates trusting relationships that better support children. Skilled workers complete creative, direct work with children and families to ensure that their views influence their plan.
12. Initial child protection conferences are timely and are well attended by partner agencies. Families are meaningfully engaged through the relational practice model, and their views inform the decision-making where appropriate. Independent advocacy services are not consistently offered to all children who are subject to child protection processes. Core group meetings are held at regular intervals during which child protection plans are reviewed and updated. When concerns are escalated, there is swift consideration of the Public Law Outline.
13. There is rigorous management oversight of pre-proceedings under the Public Law Outline through a range of senior management panels. This means that when risk to children escalates, children's plans do not drift. Letters to parents before proceedings are swiftly completed and set out in detail what is expected of them. However, letters use language that does not reflect the local authority's relational approach. Well-informed and timely viability assessments of family members are completed, which inform children's long-term living arrangements. This means that children benefit from living with their own family and with their siblings when this is in their best interests.
14. Social workers complete good-quality assessments with disabled children and their families. This informs appropriate service and support delivery, including good-quality short-break provision and access to direct payments. Children are visited frequently, and their wishes are heard, acted on and understood by social workers who have well-established relationships with them and their families.
15. When children are identified as requiring private fostering arrangements, assessments are completed. Children are visited to ensure that they are safeguarded. For a small number of children approaching 16, their assessments lack detail about their post-16 care arrangements, and there is a lack of consultation with parents about this. This means that not all children's long-term needs are considered well enough.
16. When allegations are made in respect of professionals and staff who work with children, the local authority designated officer responds swiftly and appropriately.

17. For a small number of children who present as homeless, they do not have their rights or housing options adequately explained to them. Responsive and non-defensive leaders took swift action during the inspection to provide an immediate and much-improved response.
18. Children at risk of exploitation are judiciously identified and well supported. They benefit from robust risk assessments, which are reviewed through multi-agency meetings. These are enhanced by 'place' assessments, which are completed with children and use community intelligence in order to identify and respond to risk effectively. Children who go missing from home or care are provided with individualised tailored support through direct work by the dedicated missing coordinator. The coordinator immediately engages children to offer a return home interview. These are prompt and thorough and are completed with children to inform safety planning. They build effective relationships with children and use a range of approaches to engage children, which reduces their risk.
19. Leaders have developed robust arrangements for children who are missing education. Workers closely track children who are missing education, and they use resources effectively to identify where these children are, and then quickly gain a school place for them. Workers engage effectively with members of the community, such as with the travelling community, to support the readmission of children. As a result, numbers of children missing education are very low.
20. School leaders and local authority staff work jointly to inform parents of what is involved in electing to educate their child at home. Workers take swift action where there is not a suitable education for the child. They closely monitor children who are electively home educated and support them to access education in schools or colleges to help meet their aspirations.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: outstanding

21. Senior leaders, managers and staff place children at the centre of their thinking. Children in care and care leavers are well supported and encouraged by staff to bring their experience to influence service development and practice improvement. Services are structured in a variety of ways to identify and work effectively with children and their families by using a relational approach before they enter care. These services also support very successful reunifications after a child experiences a period in care, where it is safe to do so. Social workers remain involved until their intervention is no longer required.
22. Effective edge of care assessments identify that each child has their own specific set of needs. Child-focused support for families and timely decision-making are responsive to emerging risk and long-term need. An organisational culture of family involvement and participation is strongly promoted in order to support children and families and prevent harm prior to issuing care proceedings. Social workers give robust consideration to whether children can live within their extended families, and, as a result, children are being supported to live within their wider family network when it is deemed safe and appropriate.

23. Placement planning is well considered by social workers and managers. All available options have been considered within the plans and they are responsive to children's needs and wishes where appropriate. Social workers strive to build meaningful relationships with children and involve children wherever possible in their plans. Social workers and managers make very well considered permanence decisions for children, considering how children's relationships, identity and sense of belonging will be secured. Children's need for contact with significant family members is safely assessed and well planned. Children are supported to maintain contact and they understand the reasons for their separation from their birth family.
24. Child-focused care plans are reviewed by a consistent independent reviewing officer (IRO). When required, IROs challenge professionals effectively on behalf of children to ensure that they receive the right support. Children are actively encouraged to access advocacy services. Time and care are taken to support children to attend their review meetings. This ensures that they have some say in their care and support, wherever possible.
25. Early permanence planning is well considered by social workers, and management oversight of permanence decisions is robust. Timely and good-quality viability assessments of connected carers ensure that arrangements for children are safe and appropriate. However, the timing of the decision to ratify connected carers' initial fostering approval is not always clear on children's case records.
26. When care proceedings are initiated, a range of panels provide effective senior management oversight of social work practice so that children's plans progress at pace, and within their timescales. These arrangements provide robust scrutiny and ensure a strong focus to support effective and timely permanence planning. Knowledgeable social workers complete detailed assessments and good-quality court reports. This assists the court in making well-informed permanence decisions for children. Care proceedings progress in a timely way. The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) and the judiciary support these findings.
27. Most children live in stable placements with foster carers in the local area. Placements meet their needs well and children are making very good progress. When carers require additional support, the fostering service is highly responsive, and this is leading to increased stability and a reduction in placement disruption. Foster carers feel well supported by social workers. They access high-quality support and training, which equips them well to meet the needs of individual children in their care. For some children, not all permanent matching decisions are formally ratified when children are in long-term and stable placements which have later become their permanent home.
28. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are very well supported and cared for. Social workers and foster carers go to great lengths to meet their unique needs and individual interests.
29. A strong emphasis is placed on securing legal permanence for children through the making of special guardianship orders. Special guardianship is seen as an

immensely important permanence option for children. The preparation, advice and support which are provided for special guardians is matched to the preparation, advice and support which are available to foster carers and adopters.

30. Adoption is considered for those children unable to live with their birth parents. Timely decisions are informed by comprehensive social work assessments to match adopters to children effectively. Detailed child permanence reports provide information to support children in understanding the reason for their plan. Adopters report that they receive effective training and support to prepare them to adopt their child. Life-story work, including later life letters for children, are sensitively completed to a very high standard by social workers who use creative tools with children to inform their life-story work. This assists children in understanding why decisions have been reached, and what the plans are for their permanent care.
31. There is a wide range of opportunities and recreational activities for children to enjoy. Social workers actively engage children in care and care leavers in clubs and participate in many activities with them. Children in care and care leavers feel valued and listened to. There is an enthusiastic looked after children and care leavers' forum who call themselves the 'Darlo Crew'. They regularly participate in corporate parenting panel meetings and value being involved in activities which inform service development and improvement.
32. When children in care and care leavers are at risk of exploitation or go missing from care, effective plans are swiftly put into place. Risk assessments are rigorously reviewed and updated, and children are supported by highly effective multi-agency interventions to reduce risk.
33. A strong emphasis is placed on promoting children's health and well-being. Their physical, emotional and mental health needs are well addressed. Children experience timely health assessments. The timeliness of dental checks for children is improving because of creative approaches explored by senior leaders to secure a dedicated local dentist. Therapeutic practitioners provide agile support to children and social workers in order to support children's emotional well-being and placement stability.
34. Children in care make effective progress in their education. Workers in the virtual school check that pupils are on track to achieve their ambitious outcomes. They actively monitor children's targets through effective review of their personal education plans. Virtual school staff challenge designated teachers in school about instances where these personal education plans are not precise enough. This is helping the quality of support for these children to further improve and is aided by regular involvement from virtual school staff. Children in care are supported to plan for future education, employment or training. When children leave care, many of them are then successful in finding education or employment that is aligned with their wishes.
35. Young people in care are introduced to their personal adviser at the age of 16. This gives young people time to build meaningful relationships with their worker and enables a successful transition into the aftercare service. Support continues

for young people over the age of 21 and beyond and includes those who may be more reluctant to seek help but clearly benefit from ongoing support. This includes more vulnerable young people, those in custody, with additional needs and those who are parents or expecting children.

36. Care leavers told inspectors that 'they feel that they belong to a family'. For some young people, their personal adviser is their first point of call for support. Many care leavers met with inspectors during the inspection. They are overwhelmingly positive about the support they receive and the benefits to them of their involvement in the wide range of available and frequent opportunities and activities. They feel valued, cared for, and extremely well supported.
37. Ambitious pathway plans are well-crafted and timely documents, drafted in consultation with care leavers. These help care leavers to plan for their future and identify their support needs. Care leavers are actively supported to access the important documents they will need in later life. They benefit from having their own dedicated building in the centre of the town, where they can access practical support, and staff ensure that they are not left without food or suitable clothing. This arrangement greatly enhances the support provided for care leavers, as they are provided with consistent emotional support from their trusted workers.
38. Care leavers' physical and emotional health needs are addressed very effectively. Personal advisers support them to attend their health appointments. Care leavers receive a personal health passport when they are 18, which supports them to understand their health histories. The emotional needs of care leavers are well supported by therapeutic practitioners and receive support from other services in Darlington.
39. Care leavers actively engage with the dynamic portfolio member and have secured a strong and established relationship with them. The portfolio member is described by staff as 'working miracles' in their support for them and for young people. Care leavers benefit from developing partnerships with statutory partners and the wider community sectors through access to a range of recreational and enjoyable activities. This has culminated in the Darlington-owned care leavers' covenant, which provides very generous opportunities to promote care leavers to succeed. This ensures that local businesses, the wider council and other private companies in the local area have a shared commitment to supporting Darlington care leavers to access excellent opportunities in their local town.
40. Care leavers have access to a wide range of options to move into education, employment or training and a number are attending university. The members of the leaving care team facilitate a weekly job club in order to support and prepare care leavers in filling in application forms and learning interview techniques. They are given guaranteed interviews for council jobs if they meet the essential criteria. This is contributing to the very successful outcome for care leavers in Darlington, with four in five of them in education, employment or training.
41. Care leavers have access to a plethora of suitable accommodation arrangements. Young people are supported to develop their independence skills. Personal advisers facilitate a weekly, very well attended gardening club, job club and

cookery course. Successful independent living is supported through taster flats and supported accommodation prior to care leavers living in their own independent accommodation. They are provided with high levels of floating support, and when difficulties emerge, the level is enhanced, which is helping to prevent tenancy breakdowns. 'Staying put' is actively promoted and care leavers often remain in touch with their previous foster carers, benefiting from their ongoing support into adulthood.

42. The members of the active and determined children in care and care leavers forum are extremely influential in Darlington, and their commitment is greatly appreciated by senior leaders. Those involved feel that their views and ideas are listened to and valued. Care leavers told inspectors of their personal benefits, such as the development of new skills in areas such as interviewing techniques and in communication skills, and being more able to socialise. As a result of being in care, care leavers told inspectors that they have been provided with so many more opportunities and that they will 'carry the skills they have learned, through their entire life'.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: good

43. Children's social care is led by a director of people who is determined to create a relational approach to children's social care services and to improve children's outcomes. The director is surrounded by a strong team of visible senior leaders who have a solid understanding of the vision of the local authority, the quality of practice and children's experiences. They appropriately identify areas for improvement, which are mostly reflected in their self-evaluation. The inspection identified some practice areas which are better than described. However, some strategic plans need updating, and there are some practice areas which need a stronger improvement focus.
44. The significant challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have not deterred leaders' commitment and ambition to improve services. Senior leaders have developed and are beginning to embed the local authority's chosen practice model, and to role model the relational approach to staff. This has created an environment where good social work is thriving and is helping to achieve sustained change for many families, where most children receive good-quality support.
45. A well-coordinated approach to data collection and analysis ensures that senior leaders recognise and prioritise the needs of children, and are well informed about the quality of practice. Senior leaders are in touch with the frontline and know their staff by name, and the details of the complex families they are working with. Quality assurance and performance management information has greatly improved since the last inspection. Routine performance clinics have developed a shared understanding of performance and identify areas for improvement. Practice review meetings provide a detailed insight into the quality of social work practice and have informed senior leaders' understanding about the quality of service and they help in identifying the challenges to the service.

Leaders undertake regular case file audits to ensure that they are focused on the quality of social work practice. However, the audit tool is not used consistently to best effect and leaders know there is still more to do in this area.

46. Well-developed senior manager-led panel arrangements are providing effective oversight of children's plans. This provides direction and guidance to managers and social workers in their work with children and families and is helping to reduce drift and delay. While most social workers report that they find supervision helpful and an opportunity for reflection and task-setting, written supervision records do not always reflect the richness of discussions and often contain actions that are process-driven. For some workers, supervision does not take place as frequently as it should. This makes it difficult to ensure that social workers are working through plans, and that all key decisions for children are clearly recorded. Supervision of personal advisers in the leaving care team is of an exceptional standard.
47. Strategic partnerships are highly effective. Strong collaborative relationships within the council departments share a commitment to improving the lives and experiences of children in Darlington. Partnerships with schools are well embedded in the early help offer to children and families, where school staff embrace their role as lead professional. Strong multi-agency responses are being delivered to children through well-established and effective relationships with key partners in the police, health, Cafcass and the judiciary. These relationships allow senior leaders to understand the local and regional challenges, enabling them to respond swiftly to changing demand. The remodelling of the 'front door' is a strong example of strong partnership service delivery. In addition, the weekly multi-agency audit meeting, which reviews the response to referrals, is informing multi-agency practice and learning.
48. Corporate support for children's social workers is overseen by knowledgeable leaders and members. Rigorous scrutiny by elected members provides appropriate challenge to senior leaders about the quality of services for children. The chief executive has an accurate understanding of children's social work. This is exemplified in the strong political support and financial investment in the recruitment of social work staff, the development of a very effective early help service and the continued funding of the relational practice model.
49. The local authority are active, strong and committed corporate parents. There is an unstinting focus on making sure that the needs and rights of children in care and care leavers are met to a high standard. The corporate parenting panel meets frequently, which children and young people regularly attend, and their contributions are highly valued. The panel receives detailed performance reports and holds the leadership team to account. Children's achievements are celebrated and rewarded. Senior leaders are genuinely interested to hear from children and young people, and this ensures that their views are being used to develop services and strategies.
50. The workforce development strategy has recently been updated. Senior leaders understand their recruitment needs well. While the challenges facing local authorities in recruiting and retaining a skilled and competent workforce are well

known, leaders are working hard to find ways of overcoming this. They have developed a variety of strategies to recruit and retain social workers which include a social work academy, complemented by their 'grow your own' approach. Staff are attracted to working in Darlington because of the benefits of the relational practice model and the positive workforce culture. During the inspection, there were many examples seen where children are benefiting from the support of consistent workers and have developed meaningful relationships with them.

51. There is a strong focus on ensuring that workers have access to a range of good-quality and up-to-date training and development opportunities. Training has informed and enhanced the quality of relational social work practice. For some workers, caseloads are higher than senior leaders want them to be. Senior leaders are very aware of this issue and their self-assessment reported this. They have taken a range of steps to support social work practitioners and have ensured that children are visited. Despite high caseloads, social workers have secured very positive relationships with families.
52. Social workers are rightly proud of their work and the effective relationships with children and families they have harnessed. They genuinely want to make a difference for children. Workers in Darlington are extremely committed to the local authority and feel valued by senior leaders. Social workers whom the inspectors spoke to describe an environment where they feel confident and supported by their managers to make decisions. They feel cared about and supported by them.

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