

23 March 2017

Mr Tony Oakman  
Deputy Chief Executive and Strategic Director – People  
The Council House  
Priory Road  
Dudley  
West Midlands DY1 1HF

Dear Mr Oakman

### **Monitoring visit of Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit of Dudley children's services on 21 and 22 February 2017. This was the second monitoring visit since the local authority was judged to be inadequate in February 2016. The visit was carried out by Jenny Turnross and Pauline Higham, Her Majesty's Inspectors.

The local authority continues to make positive progress in improving services for children and young people.

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

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the area of help and protection, with a particular focus on children receiving early help services. Additionally, inspectors reviewed the arrangements for assessing children's needs. The progress of the local authority was reviewed against the authority's improvement plan targets to assess the distance travelled.

The visit considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, supervision records and observation of social workers and team managers. Inspectors also spoke to senior managers and parents.

### **Overview**

The local authority continues to deliver its ambitious improvement plan, and this is resulting in positive progress in a number of key areas. The Director of Children's Services has a clear set of priorities, and these continue to be met. Senior leaders, elected members and partners continue to support the much needed improvements.

The local authority is demonstrating some qualitative and sustainable improvements in the areas reviewed during this monitoring visit. Staff morale is good, staff retention has improved and implementation of the early help strategy is beginning to

reduce the number of children who, previously, would have received statutory services. Management oversight of social work practice has improved, and this is starting to benefit children's lives. The local authority knows that there is still much to do to ensure that all children receive effective services. Senior leaders continue to drive an ambitious programme of improvement work to support positive change.

### **Findings and evaluation of progress**

As a consequence of caseloads having been reduced significantly and becoming more manageable, social workers have more time to see children, to prepare reports and to reflect on their practice. Regular supervision is resulting in increased management oversight and case direction is recorded on children's files. This means that the potential for children's plans to drift is reducing. Communication between senior leaders and the workforce has improved, and social workers report positively about the programme of change. The mandatory back to basics training and team manager training programmes are resulting in an improved understanding of roles and responsibilities. As a result, children are starting to receive the right response at the right time.

While progress in many areas is positive, a number of areas continue to require development. All senior management roles are now filled permanently. However, workforce stability continues to be a challenge, as there are still a high number of temporary social work staff. This means that some children do not benefit from stable relationships with their social workers. The local authority does not always have an accurate overview of practice, as access to reliable electronic performance information is still underdeveloped. Case files are showing increased audit activity, although the local authority is not yet using the learning from audits to improve services for children. All of these areas are identified as priorities in the improvement plan, and work on these is in progress.

Senior managers continue to identify and tackle weak practice. Since the last monitoring visit, managers found a number of unallocated cases. Immediate action was taken that included a review of each case to ensure that no child was unsafe. An additional social work team has been created to give social workers capacity to complete assessments in a more timely and qualitative way, and senior managers are now conducting daily checks of case allocations. At the time of this monitoring visit, there were no unallocated cases, and the local authority was able to demonstrate that it continues to appropriately address areas of concern.

The Ofsted inspection in February 2016 identified that the early help offer to children in Dudley was ineffective. As a result, early help services have been redesigned and a new, targeted early help offer is being implemented. The Local Safeguarding Children Board has issued associated guidance and training to all agencies. Early indicators show the trajectory of referrals to these services are increasing and in turn decreasing to children's social care. This is positive progress as, until recently, early help assessments and team around the child plans (TACs) have been under-used by all agencies, resulting in an over-reliance on statutory services.

The threshold for referring children to early help services is now understood by social workers and managers in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). This is resulting in a greater number of children receiving an appropriate and proportionate response. Further work is needed to ensure that all partners understand the thresholds for early help and statutory services, to ensure that children and families receive help as soon as concerns are identified.

There are clear protocols and processes for stepping up and stepping down between differing levels of services. Multi-agency allocation and transfer meetings take place weekly at family centres and these meetings scrutinise practice to ensure that children are receiving the right service. Inspectors found that these meetings are working well. The quality of early help assessments and plans are not yet consistently good. The local authority plans to establish a quality assurance check of all early help work.

There is not yet a consistent approach to the use of an evidence-based model of practice, although there is a task and finish group in place to develop this. The local authority knows that a consistent approach will support the partnership in supporting children effectively.

Performance management within the early help service is being developed. Managers and staff know what information is required to support them in monitoring outcomes for children, although they are heavily reliant on manual systems. Plans to implement a new electronic case recording system are at the early stages.

The quality of social work assessments needs to improve to ensure a consistent response for all children. An internal evaluation of the assessment service was completed in October 2016 and identified a number of recommendations for urgent action. Many of the actions have been completed. However, these improvements are very recent, and the local authority acknowledges that the quality of work in the assessment service needs to become firmly established and then be sustained to ensure that the responses that all children receive are consistent.

Most assessments are now allocated swiftly. Managers are authorising assessments quickly and they are starting to record their rationale for undertaking the assessment, along with timescales for completion. Social workers are beginning to record how they have shared the outcomes of assessments with families; this is an improvement.

Assessments routinely consider the presenting risks, historical information and the views of other agencies. Direct work with children is starting to inform assessments, which is positive progress. Culture, diversity and identity are considered well in assessments. Consultation with family members is now consistently seen in case files, and sensitive work is carried out with parents and children. Social workers are now completing more timely assessments. However, many assessments continue to be overly descriptive and lack analysis. This is an area for development.

Pre-birth assessments and parenting assessments are very effective, particularly those completed by the prevention and intervention team. They are sensitively written, comprehensive and child focused. Social work research and theory are used to inform parenting assessments. They are being used increasingly as evidence in court proceedings. A number of these assessments have been commended by the courts as good practice examples.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you and your staff for your continued positive engagement with the programme of monitoring visits. I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Jenny Turnross

**Her Majesty's Inspector**