

Improvement Notice

To: NAME Darlington Borough Council (“the Council”)
ADDRESS Town Hall, Darlington, DL1 5QT

This Improvement Notice is issued to Darlington Borough Council on 30 October 2015 following the judgement that children’s services are inadequate, as identified in the Ofsted inspection report published 1 September 2015.

1. This Notice is given to address all the areas for improvement identified in the report of the inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers and review of the effectiveness of the Local Safeguarding Children Board published by Ofsted on 1 September 2015.
2. To comply with this Notice, the following actions are required of the Council, working with its partner agencies (“partners”) as identified by the Children Act 2004 (Section 11):

Adviser arrangements

3. The Secretary of State has chosen to appoint Red Quadrant (“the adviser”) to provide advice to the Department for Education and/or the Council. The Council will work with the adviser until some such time that the Secretary of State is satisfied this is no longer required.

Improvement board

4. The Council will establish an Improvement Board (“the Board”) and a nominated representative of Red Quadrant will undertake the role of Independent Chair (“the Chair”) of the Board. The Board is to meet at least every 8 weeks. If in the future the Improvement Board wishes to vary the frequency of meetings this must first be agreed by the Department for Education. The Board should include key partner agencies in its membership.
5. The Improvement Board Chair will provide to the Secretary of State a written progress report against the areas set out in paragraph 6 below in January 2016 and at intervals to be agreed thereafter. The Council will give the Improvement Board Chair all reasonable assistance to enable progress reports to be provided to the Secretary of State.

Improvement plan

6. The Council will submit an Improvement Plan to the adviser by 30 October 2015. The adviser will review the plan against the areas listed in 6a.-c. below and make recommendations to the Department for Education as to whether the plan is fit for purpose to drive continuous and sustainable improvement in the areas of weakness identified in the 2015 Ofsted report. The plan should be grounded in an understanding of the needs of children, young people and families. The Board is accountable for delivering the Improvement Plan. The plan should include actions to

improve:

- a. leadership, management, governance and partnerships;
- b. timeliness and quality of social work assessments and reports and delivery of practice;
- c. strength, stability and quality of the social work workforce;
- d. services to children in need of help and protection; and
- e. services to children looked after and care leavers.

7. To ensure there is clear evidence of progression:

- a. the content of the improvement plan and a record of progress against it must be kept up to date;
- b. the Council must report to the adviser on progress against the objectives in the plan at least at monthly intervals and sooner if requested by the adviser;
- c. a comprehensive and accurate data set that is regularly communicated and understood by all levels of the Council must be in place to ensure that data better informs practice and provision in children's services will be developed and delivered;
- d. reports to the adviser should include analysis and recommendations supported by performance trends against key data sets including the quality of service and outcomes for children and young people;
- e. the council should highlight those objectives which are slow to progress and highlight where contributions need to be strengthened;
- f. the views of frontline staff, and children and young people will be taken into consideration in the development of practice and standards.

Progress reviews, diagnostic reviews and assessments

8. Reviews of progress against the improvement plan will be conducted at least every six months and more regularly where appropriate. Reviews may be:

- a. conducted by the adviser and officials from the Department for Education; or
- b. commissioned from a local authority or other party agreed between the adviser and the Council.

9. From time to time the adviser may require that a diagnostic review or assessment of performance in a specific service area is undertaken by a local authority or other party agreed between the adviser and the Council.

10. For any review or assessment, the Council should provide the person(s) conducting it with:

- a. access to and time with staff and leadership;
- b. accurate and up to date data on performance and quality;
- c. facilities to carry out the reviews;
- d. access to case files, minutes of meetings, supervision records or any other relevant information.

11. Prior to any progress review conducted by the adviser, the Council should provide its own assessment of improvement. This may include, but is not limited to:

- a. progress against the improvement plan objectives;
- b. staff surveys;
- c. staff supervision and the quality of feedback.

12. Taking account of the measures set out in this improvement notice the Council is required to deliver the actions included in the improvement plan within 12 months of the publication of this notice.

Improvement against the above measures will be assessed as follows:

13. The adviser will provide to the Department for Education regular reports of progress or concern against the outputs defined by the improvement plan. There will be a specific review point within 4 months of the publication of this notice.

Failure to comply with this Improvement Notice by the assessment dates or poor progress:

14. Should the Council be unwilling or unable to comply with this improvement notice, or should ministers not be satisfied with the Council's progress at any stage, ministers may choose to invoke their statutory powers of intervention under section 497A of the Education Act 1996 to direct the Council to enter into an appropriate arrangement to secure the improvements required in children's services.

Signed:  Date:30/10/2015.....

Edward Timpson MP
Minister of State for Children and Families