

26 November 2007

Mr Kim Bromley-Derry
Director of Children's Services
South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council
Town Hall and Civic Offices
Westoe Road
South Shields
NE33 2RL

Dear Mr Bromley-Derry

2007 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN SOUTH TYNESIDE METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

This letter summarises the findings of the 2007 annual performance assessment for your local authority. The judgements in the letter draw on the analysis of the Children and Young People's Plan and the evidence and briefings provided by Ofsted, other inspectorates and relevant bodies. We are grateful for the information you provided to support this process and for the time given by you and your colleagues during the assessment.

Overall effectiveness of children's services

Grade 3

South Tyneside Metropolitan borough Council continues to deliver good services for children and young people. Most outcomes are good and some are outstanding. The council is tackling the areas identified for improvement in the previous annual performance assessment with some notable successes, such as the good improvements made to the attainment of students in Key Stage 4, the much improved take-up of direct payments to children with disabilities and their families and the dramatically improved rates of attendance of looked after children at their reviews. The council is improving significantly the well-being and achievements of children and young people in the area.

Being healthy

Grade 4

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The council makes an excellent contribution to improving the health of children and young people. There is a trend of continuous and sustained improvement. High numbers of children in the borough report that they are in good health.

Relationships between the council and health partners are strong and this is exemplified in the joint appointment by the council and Primary Care Trust of a Director of Public Health.

The council and its partners continue to work well together in lowering the numbers of teenage pregnancies. Teenage conception rates are below those of similar councils and have fallen consistently over a three year period at a faster rate than those nationally and locally as a result of a comprehensive range of services which are in place. South Tyneside has been recognised as an area of innovative practice by the British Medical Journal. Details of a service designed to prevent repeat unintended conceptions to teenage parents through the provision of a dedicated postnatal contraception service have been included on its Intelligence Website.

Childhood obesity is of great concern to the council and through extensive research it has been identified as a priority for action. In order to combat the problem, free leisure passes are available to young people to encourage swimming and gym exercise. These have a high take-up rate. Innovative programmes have also been developed such as the Mind, Exercise, Nutrition, Do it programme (MEND) involving parents and carers in healthy eating, nutrition and exercise programmes. An identified group of 47 children from 41 families have shown significant weight loss and lowering of waist circumference as a result of the programme. The overall self-esteem of those children involved in the programme has also been measured by a psychologist and shows improvement.

The health needs of looked after children are prioritised and numbers of looked after children receiving health, dental and other surveillance is high. The promotion of healthy lifestyles is a key feature of placements for looked after children and is assisted by the involvement of a dedicated nurse.

A comprehensive Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) is in place with round-the-clock access. A review of the service has recently been completed and, as a result, funding is being increased in preventative and crisis intervention services to deal with early onset of mental health problems in children. The need for children to be looked after outside of the borough in specialist placements has diminished as a direct result of CAMHS interventions and numbers placed have fallen consistently over a three year period from 52 to 14. Young offenders requiring mental health assessments receive them in a planned and timely way.

Progress toward the National Healthy School standard is good and the council has exceeded its agreed target with all schools involved in the programme.

Staying safe

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the council to staying safe has been good and the majority of children report that they feel safe at home, school and in their local area.

Inspection evidence from children's homes, foster homes and schools suggests that children and young people are provided with a safe environment. Inspection of the fostering service in December 2006 inspected six standards and found them to be adequate with well recorded and robust recruitment procedures including effective vetting. Regulatory inspections of all three of the children's homes in the borough found that procedures for safeguarding were in place and the privacy and dignity of children were well protected. Section 5 inspections of schools confirm that all schools inspected had procedures in place to safeguard learners. An innovative emotional well-being programme has been launched by the council, together with an anti-bullying strategy which is reviewed annually. High numbers of children report that bullying is dealt with appropriately at school and there is a bullying helpline for those who need additional help or support. South Tyneside recently hosted and set the agenda for a regional anti-bullying conference.

The referral and assessment service for children in need operates effectively. The timeliness of initial assessments in social care cases has worsened over the last period and is considerably below national figures and those of similar councils. This is due largely to staffing difficulties in assessment teams. The service has now recruited to all vacant posts and strengthened the overall numbers of assessment staff. It is already recording improvements in performance.

Procedures for child protection are effective as evidenced by good performance on a wide range of indicators. Numbers on the Child Protection Register have risen marginally but remain in line with similar authorities. All children on the Child Protection Register have a qualified social worker allocated to their case and reviews of cases are undertaken in a timely manner. The Local Safeguarding Children Board is in place and operating effectively with strong representation from all relevant local agencies.

The council is minimising its use of residential care in favour of family placement or adoption in order to maximise better outcomes for children. Almost all looked after children and young people have a qualified social worker allocated to their case, their case is reviewed in a timely way and very high numbers of children take part in their review. The number of children in family placements is considerably higher than both the national average and neighbouring authorities. The council has one of the highest rates of adoption in the country and children are placed quickly when adoption is thought to be in their best interest. The council's adoption service was judged to be outstanding in its most recent inspection. The overall result of the council's policy is high levels of stability in the lives of children and young people. The numbers of looked after children continues to show a small rise from the previous year, although overall the council looks after fewer children than its similar councils but more than councils nationally. Action is being taken to strengthen the family support service to provide a greater range of alternatives to care.

Area for development

- Ensure the recent improvement in the timeliness of initial assessments is sustained.

Enjoying and achieving

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this area is good. A high proportion of children enter the early years of education with skills below those expected for their age. Early years provision is available for all children and ensuring that children are ready for school is seen as a priority. All private providers have agreed to participate in a quality assurance scheme and the council has been part of a pilot programme providing two year olds with 7.5 hours of education a week. Good partnership working has ensured that moderation of the Foundation Stage Profile is secure and that consistent information is given to schools and early years settings. There is an integrated strategy for under fives and the council is developing its own on-entry collection of data. The outcomes of inspections of early years settings are generally satisfactory. Prompt action has been taken to ensure that there is support from qualified teachers in all settings including children's centres.

The attainment of 7, 11 and 14 year olds continues to improve. Attainment in 2006 in all key stages was generally above that of similar areas and in line with national averages. Provisional 2007 data indicate that further gains have been made. The rate of improvement is about the same as the national rate or better except in mathematics at Key Stages 1 and 2, where improvements are being made more slowly. The attainment of boys in writing at all key stages lags behind that of girls, although improvements have been made at Key Stage 2 as a result of well-targeted action. Although good progress has been made in raising the aspirations and attainment of children and young people, the achievement gap between schools is too wide. South Tyneside is part of the Making Good Progress Pilot. This will provide additional challenge to schools and support transition between Key Stages 2 and 3.

Standards at Key Stage 4 are improving rapidly. In 2006, results were in line with national averages and those of similar areas. The proportion of 16 year olds achieving five good GCSEs including English and mathematics improved significantly and was above similar areas and in line with national averages. The proportion of pupils leaving school with at least one GCSE also improved and was well above similar areas and in line with the national figure. Early evidence indicates that these improvements have been maintained in 2007. The local authority analyses results by gender, ethnicity and vulnerability. Although some cohorts are very small, most young people make at least satisfactory and sometimes better progress given their starting points.

Services are working very effectively together to meet the needs of vulnerable children and young people. Targeted action has ensured that looked after children attend school regularly with a good reduction in the number of absences over the past two years. A very high proportion of children looked after achieve at least one GCSE or nationally recognised qualification and a small but increasing proportion have gained five or more GCSEs in recent years. The outcomes of Section 5 inspections indicate that pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities or those with a

statement of educational need make at least satisfactory and usually good progress. However, proportionately more pupils have a statement of educational need than nationally or in similar areas and too many children and young people are educated in special schools. Although there was a decline in the number of new statements issued in 2006, too few of these pupils were placed in mainstream schools. Plans to improve the situation are firmly embedded in the overall plan to transform South Tyneside's primary and secondary schools and there is a clear timescale for improvement. A package of training and information is in place to ensure that staff in mainstream schools have the skills and confidence they need to support the inclusion agenda.

Robust action has been taken to improve attendance and this is now in line with national figures in both primary and secondary schools. There were no permanent exclusions in primary schools and only a small number of fixed-term exclusions. The number of permanent exclusions in secondary schools declined significantly in 2006 and the number of fixed-term exclusions is now below the national figure although above that of similar areas. All permanently excluded pupils receive 20 hours of education a week. A much greater proportion of pupils with statements of educational need were excluded for a fixed term from secondary schools in 2004/05 than nationally or in similar areas. The alternative education service provides for pupils from Key Stage 1 upwards. It provides a good standard of education for pupils but currently caters for too many diverse needs. Placements with the service can last for some time and the process of re-integration is complex. Many children and young people are placed in special schools on leaving the service. Although there are plans to introduce behaviour and inclusion strategies, these are not yet in place.

The capacity of the local authority to support and challenge schools is good. There is a small team of school improvement officers who know their schools well. There is a transparent and well understood strategy for identifying schools causing concern and providing well-targeted support. The outcomes of most Section 5 inspections are at least satisfactory with a significant proportion of schools in all phases being judged as good or better. Two primary schools are in Ofsted categories of concern. As part of the move to reduce surplus places and improve primary schools these two schools will be closed and reopened as one Fresh Start School. The legal processes which are necessary to bring this about have already started. The support given to these schools was good overall. No special schools, secondary schools or pupil referral units have been placed in categories of concern since 2005.

Planned actions to reduce the number of surplus places in both primary and secondary school are closely aligned to initiatives to improve school buildings, further raise attainment and aspiration and regenerate the area. Only one secondary school currently has more than 25% surplus places. This will be reduced when the school is rebuilt as part of the Building Schools for the Future initiative. The Transforming Our Primary Schools programme plans to reduce surplus places in primary schools. This is now in the final stages of consultation.

Area for development

- Implement an inclusion and behaviour strategy.

Making a positive contribution

Grade 4

Summary of strengths and areas for development

Performance in this area is outstanding. The council puts children and young people at the heart of everything it does and has designed many of its services and systems to include the voice of children and young people. This is evidenced by a clear policy to involve them in staff appointments at all levels in the organisation up to and including the Director of Children's Services. A strong system of school councils and a youth parliament are in operation and young people also stand for election to community area forums, which mirrors the system used in the wider community by councillors. Young people clearly have a voice in local affairs and, following consultation with 327 young people during the summer, an integrated programme of summer activities was delivered to over 7,000 children. Annual achievement awards are made by the council to young people together with personal letters of congratulation for achievement in examinations. The council does not take part in tokenism and is clear it will only consult on issues where young people have a real opportunity to influence outcomes.

Staffing in the youth service has recently been strengthened and the number of contacts with young people in the community has exceeded 5,000 this year. The Youth Inclusion Programme is recognised nationally as an example of best practice and works with an average of 300 children and young people each quarter. The outcomes of Section 5 inspections are very positive in this area with most schools judged to be good or better.

The council works with and consults its looked after children and young people. A twice yearly newsletter containing information and news is circulated to all looked after children. Using council funding, looked after young people worked with web designers to build the 'Do you care' website which is widely used and gives those young people placed away from the authority a direct voice. The number of looked after children and young people contributing to their reviews has increased dramatically since the last assessment from 67% to 96%, evidencing considerable progress. The leaving care team was placed fourth nationally for the results it has obtained in securing accommodation and employment for young people.

The council and the police are working very effectively together to combat offending and anti-social behaviour both in the wider community and amongst looked after children and young people. The youth offending team are targeting preventative work in "hot spots" identified by the police and funding is being made available from the council to assist the project. The action taken by the council has been effective and rates of re-offending and those offending for the first time are falling. The 'Get Involved' programme had a very positive effect in reducing the incidence of crime and anti-social behaviour during the summer period. The numbers of looked after children committing offences, whilst falling, remain too high and above those of similar authorities.

Area for development

- Reduce the numbers of looked after children and young people who commit offences.

Achieving economic well-being

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this area is good. Good progress has been made on improving the take-up of direct payments to enable children and young people with disabilities and their families to purchase care which meets their needs. As the result of effective targeted action, including the appointment of a Direct Payments Officer, the up-take of direct payments has now doubled to 18. A short-term target of 25 has been set for March 2008. The longer term target is for the majority of care purchased to be through direct payments.

The outcomes of Section 5 inspections judge economic well-being to be good or better in most schools. As the result of concerns raised by the voluntary sector, very effective action has been taken to promote financial inclusion and reduce debt across the borough. A number of partners have worked together to raise awareness of financial matters and improve financial stability. Financial education takes place in children's centres, on E2E courses and in schools. There is a well established credit union and the council expects to issue its own credit card in the near future. This will help users to manage their finances more effectively and make large payments such as deposits for accommodation. The benefits service refers clients to the credit union where appropriate. The council has been awarded Beacon Status in recognition of this work.

There are protocols in place to ensure that most young people have access to decent and affordable housing and to reduce the extent to which children and families are in temporary accommodation. Most care leavers are in appropriate accommodation. Support is provided to keep young people in families and there is support for vulnerable young people who are living independently. Services work in partnership with the voluntary sector to provide support, advice and guidance.

The 14–19 strategy is seen as central to the regeneration of the area. Progress has been slower than expected because of the involvement of new partners, including headteachers, and the setting up of new structures and ways of working. However, the time taken to establish effective relationships has been well spent. Two collaboratives have been established and are making rapid progress. The 14–19 curriculum is developing well. No diploma bids have been approved but the consortium will submit applications for 10 diplomas by the next deadline. Young people were surveyed as to their preferred choice of diplomas and the selection of specific diplomas is firmly linked to local needs. Twenty three local manufacturing

businesses are now working with the collaboratives. This is significantly increasing opportunities for young people.

GCE/VCE AS/A2 results rose significantly in 2006 and were above national figures and well above similar areas. Training and learning places are available for all young people and the Flexible Curriculum Project has had a positive impact on the engagement and attitudes of disaffected young people. The proportion of 17 year olds participating in education and training is broadly in line with national figures and the number of young people completing apprenticeships is rising. However, although the proportion of young people not in education, employment or training is declining it remains well above national figures, although it is broadly in line with similar areas. A number of young people choose to continue their education outside of the area. Were data to be collected on residency, progress towards meeting targets would be considerably improved with a further 2.2% reduction. The Connexions Service is proactive in targeting young people and tracking their whereabouts. There is good partnership working between Connexions and the Leaving Care Service and this ensures that the needs of care leavers are met. The success rate of young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities into work-based learning is equally as good as that of other young people but there are differences apparent when analysed by gender and ethnicity.

There is good access to family learning programmes and the number of programmes available has nearly doubled. Programmes are now delivered in 37 schools. The number of male learners is increasing as is the number of participants with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Although the number of child care places has reduced overall, there were more places than were needed so there are still sufficient places available. Children's centres are working well with Jobcentre Plus to support young families back in to education and training. A Parents' Strategy is in place. This was based on thorough consultation with parents. There is a Parents' Directory and an annual Early Years Fair.

Area for development

- Increase further the proportion of young people engaged in education, employment or training.

Capacity to improve, including the management of children's services

Grade 4

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The council has outstanding capacity to improve its services for children and young people. The Director of Children's Services provides strong and effective leadership and officers and elected members have high and achievable aspirations. These are based on a thorough and accurate analysis of need and take into account the views of parents, carers, children and young people. Priorities give due regard to the full range of equality and diversity issues and all actions are securely linked to the regeneration process. The objectives and targets in the Children and Young People's Plan are

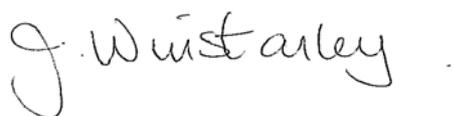
clearly linked to other corporate and organisational plans. Roles and responsibilities are being reviewed and new teams have been created in order to improve effectiveness and reduce duplication. All involved share a common sense of purpose and have a thorough understanding of current strengths and areas for development.

Effective consultation is the key to many recent improvements. There are regular and routine interactions with children and young people including those who are generally recognised as hard-to-reach. Participation is increasing because young people feel that their views are listened to. Partnership working is good. Time is spent on developing relationships and promoting a common understanding and a genuine belief in what is being achieved. Review processes are secure and the council evaluates its actions critically. The local authority's scrutiny commission includes children and young people. This is managed sensitively in order to promote the confidence of participants. Innovative solutions are promoted. As part of performance management arrangements, there is a 'performance clinic' which gives individuals time and support to look at problems and develop innovative solutions.

The council has seized the opportunities available through national and local initiatives to transform services radically and bring about wide ranging and sustainable improvements. The council welcomes external support and challenge and acts promptly on areas for improvement. There have been many significant successes in narrowing the gap between outcomes for children and young people, including those who are most vulnerable, and there is a sustained trend of improvement.

The children's services grade is the performance rating for the purpose of section 138 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. It will also provide the score for the children and young people service block in the comprehensive performance assessment to be published by the Audit Commission.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Juliet Winstanley".

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager
Local Services Inspection