

26 November 2007

Mr T Doughty
Executive Director of Children's Services
Northumberland County Council
Children's Services Directorate
County Hall
Morpeth
NE61 2EF

Dear Mr Doughty

2007 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

This letter summarises the findings of the 2007 annual performance assessment for your local authority, some of which was conducted at the same time as the analysis element of the joint area review. The 2006 annual performance assessment informed the scoping of the joint area review and the initial findings of the 2007 annual performance assessment were taken into account by the joint area review team at the end of the analysis stage. The outcomes of the joint area review were then considered alongside a review of recent data in arriving at the final annual performance assessment judgements for 2007. As a result, many of the areas for development highlighted in this letter align with the recommendations in the joint area review report and should be similarly aligned in any future action plan produced by the council and its partners. The judgements in the letter also draw on your assessment of progress or review of the Children and Young People's Plan where it was available, and the evidence and briefings provided by Ofsted and other inspectorates. We are grateful for the information you provided to support this and for the time given by yourself and your colleagues during the process.

Overall effectiveness of children's services

Grade 3

Northumberland County Council consistently delivers good services for children and young people. The council has strengths in all key aspects of its work and a good capacity to improve. Senior leaders and managers provide a strong sense of direction and have a proven track record of improvement. Progress since the last annual performance assessment is good. The recent joint area review found the way the analysis of needs informed service priorities, service delivery, and improved outcomes was better.

Children's services are making good progress in improving the achievement and well-being of young people. Effective support provided by the children's directorate has resulted in standards rising at all key stages. The council makes a good contribution to improving outcomes for the health, safety and well-being of children and young people.

Being healthy

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this area is good. Almost all schools participate in the Healthy Schools Programme. The foundations are in place to deliver advice and guidance on a preventative basis to a wide audience of children and young people. The council is now working towards accreditation of schools for the new Healthy Schools Standard. A high proportion of looked after children and young people have their teeth checked by a dentist and receive a yearly health check. The council and Care Trust have achieved well in this respect.

The latest data show teenage conception rates have reduced for the third successive year. Teenage pregnancy action plans have been commended by the regional teenage pregnancy coordinator for Government Office North East as appropriate for reducing teenage conceptions and supporting young parents. Northumberland now compares well with other council areas although rates are high in some parts of the county. The council and its partners rightly continue to make this a priority working towards the government target for reductions by 2010. Chlamydia rates are high in Northumberland. The development of a national screening programme and the introduction of local services for sexually transmitted infections have served to increase awareness. But, as local treatment services are relatively new, the impact on rates is yet to be demonstrated.

Northumberland has a well-established package of education, prevention and treatment services for children and young people to address drug, alcohol and solvent misuse. The substance misuse service 'SORTED' has been successful in supporting young people involved with the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). A swift service is provided to all young people referred who are looked after or involved with the Youth Offending Service. About 20% more young people were receiving drug treatment in 2006/07 than in 2005/06 which is an improvement, but was below the target set in the Children and Young People's Plan.

A comprehensive CAMHS strategy is now in place and provision across all four tiers is good. Early intervention work is particularly strong but needs to be strengthened. The Children and Young People's Plan recognises that waiting times for CAMHS need to be reduced. Recent data confirm that there has been a significant improvement in all areas across the county. Good progress has been made towards a comprehensive CAMHS during 2006-07. Remaining areas for development are services for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and young people with complex mental health needs. New structural arrangements are planned whereby

health professionals employed in the Health Care Trust are managed within the children's services directorate. This is a good step towards service integration.

Areas for development

- Targeted action to improve transition arrangements into adult mental health services.
- Reduce waiting times for CAMHS and strengthen transition arrangements into adult mental health services.

Staying safe

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this area is good. Prevention of children and young people becoming looked after is promoted through the county-wide parenting strategy, the children's support team, and respite care arrangements which target children and young people on the edge of care. A significant proportion of such children and young people are being supported without becoming looked after.

Adoption performance is good. The percentage of looked after children and young people who were adopted increased in 2006-07 and a high proportion of these were adopted in a timely fashion. All looked after children and young people are allocated to a qualified social worker, and a high proportion of reviews of looked after children and young people were held within timescales, indicating effective care planning processes.

The 2006 annual performance assessment identified placement stability for children and young people placed in long-term care as an area for improvement. The council has taken action, for example by increasing support to carers and appointing four permanence workers to improve planning. Performance in 2006-07 has improved and placement stability is now in line with that of similar councils and the England average.

The council recognises that too many looked after children and children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are placed in out-of-county placements. There are insufficient numbers of foster carers, and in some areas insufficient respite carers for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Despite continuous recruitment, the council has been unable to increase its pool of carers. The use of independent fostering agencies has driven up the unit cost of looked after children and young people. The council is addressing this through its commissioning and procurement strategy. Some improvement has been achieved in 2006-07 with reducing numbers of children and young people in placements run by independent providers of residential and foster care which has reduced costs.

During 2006-07, regulatory inspections of the adoption service, fostering service, and children's homes judged performance to be good overall, while the adoption service and fostering service were rated adequate for the staying safe outcome. Agencies work well together to reduce the incidence of child abuse and neglect.

Performance in relation to safeguarding improved in 2006-07 from its previous high level. In the 2006 annual performance assessment, the length of time children and young people remained on the Child Protection Register was an area for improvement. The council has introduced new systems to monitor the progress of child protection plans which are working effectively.

The rate of children and young people on the Child Protection Register increased in 2006-07 in line with national trends. The council attributes this to increasing identification of domestic violence incidents. The Children and Young People's Plan describes domestic violence as a significant problem in Northumberland which affects the safety and well-being of children and young people. The Local Safeguarding Children Board has implemented a three year domestic violence strategy and is now measuring the effectiveness of services with specific indicators. Baselines and targets have been prepared for inclusion in the local area agreement. The Children and Young People's Plan has set the number of children and young people who say they feel bullied at school as a priority for reduction. The council introduced its anti-bullying strategy in October 2006 and is now establishing benchmarks from which progress can be measured.

The Audit Commission school survey revealed that judgements on the quality of advice, support and training for designated teachers for looked after children and young people were in the lowest quartile of councils. The council is reviewing the position and has agreed funding for an additional training post. The proportion of childminders issued with an action relating to safety at the point of registration is significantly higher than the national average.

The main cause of child deaths in Northumberland is road accidents. The Department for Transport has agreed a target to reduce the number of children and young people killed or seriously injured in road traffic accidents by 50% by 2010 compared with the average for 1994-98. Northumberland achieved a 46% reduction in 2005 which is broadly in line with the national average, and further reductions were made in 2006.

Areas for development

- Increase the number of foster carers.
- Continue to reduce numbers of looked after children and young people in out-of-county placements, and of children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in out-of-county residential placements.

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. The impact of action taken two years ago is the raising of standards and the quality of provision. Effective support provided by the children's directorate has resulted in standards rising at all key stages. The improving trend has been sustained during 2006 and standards are mostly above those of similar authorities.

This view is supported by school inspections where almost all children and young people are judged to enjoy school and achieve well. The quality of provision is good in the early years and standards at Key Stage 1 are significantly above average. Standards at Key Stage 2 have improved and are now average. Performance at Key Stage 2 is not as good as the other key stages. The authority continues to closely monitor progress and intervenes when schools need support.

Standards at Key Stage 3 and 4 have improved in the last year. They are above the national average and rising. At Key Stage 3 they are above those of similar authorities. Girls significantly outperform boys in English. GCSE results continue to improve and the number of students gaining five or more A* to C grades including English and mathematics is now above average. Most children and young people including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, make at least satisfactory and often better progress. The achievement of looked after children and young people is improving. The recent joint area review found looked after children's performance at the age of 11 and 14 in 2006 was better than that of similar children and young people nationally and 70% of 16-year-olds achieved at least one GCSE grade A* to G or equivalent, an increase of 13% from 2005, which is good. Overall, rates of progress are improving and value added measures between Key Stages 2 and 4 are above average nationally.

In contrast to this positive picture of improvement, the proportion of schools causing concern has increased. No schools were placed in a category of concern for two years. Since January 2007, one middle and a first school required special measures and another middle school a notice to improve. In context, this is a smaller proportion compared to similar authorities and the average nationally. Plans to support them are comprehensive and the authority is monitoring weaker schools more closely.

Children and young people's attitudes and behaviour in schools are good or better in well over three quarters of schools inspected in the last two years. Fewer children and young people are excluded from schools and the number of temporary exclusions is falling. School attendance is above average when compared with similar authorities and the national picture. The authority is closely monitoring the increasing amount of authorised absence during term time.

The authority was seeking to increase the involvement of young people in youth and community work in the previous annual performance assessment. It has developed an integrated youth services framework and put it into practice. The 2007 Audit Commission school survey and the Tellus2 student survey confirm the youth service is reaching more than one third of young people in the county aged 13 to 19.

Areas for development

- Achievement and standards at Key Stage 2.
- More rigorous monitoring and support for weaker schools.

Making a positive contribution

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this area is good. Ofsted inspections rated the majority of schools as outstanding or good on the extent to which learners make a positive contribution. Participation by children and young people in the development of the Children and Young People's Plan in 2006 was commended as national good practice by the Children's Minister. The successful consultation was repeated in 2007 with 4,500 young people being surveyed through online contact with schools, including schools for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. However, limited opportunities exist for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to contribute to service level decisions, or for looked after children and care leavers to participate in service planning and corporate parenting meetings. The Children and Young People's Plan has prioritised ensuring young carers have easy access to support. Services for young carers are expanding, improving coverage and response times.

The youth service has recently introduced training for Youth Achievement Awards to recognise positive contributions by young people across the county. The Youth Offending Service was awarded a rating of good in its last inspection in 2005, one of the few in England to achieve this. The Youth Offending Service has engaged with partners to develop positive activities for young people. It has been successful in reaching the target set by the Youth Justice Board to reduce the number of first-time entrants into the criminal justice system achieving this two years ahead of schedule. The Children and Young People's Plan has set a new target to reduce the number of first-time entrants by a further 5% from the 2006 baseline by 2008. Re-offending rates remain a priority. Plans are in place and the Youth Offending Service is confident these will lead to improvement.

The council is developing partnerships with the voluntary sector to provide information and support groups for parents and carers of children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Over 90% of children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities had a transition plan to support their move from children's services to adults' services.

Areas for development

- Reduce the re-offending rate.
- Improve opportunities for vulnerable groups to contribute to service planning.

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. Standards post-16 are rising. The percentage of young people reaching Level 3 has increased from 41.8% in 2004 to 45.8% in 2006, which is above the national average. Partnerships with the local Learning and Skills Council, Connexions, and local businesses are strong and evidence from school inspections confirms that provision to prepare young people for working life is good. The percentage of work-based learners gaining national vocational qualifications has risen from 49.5% in 2004 to 59.7% in 2006, which is above the national average. There is a similar above average increase in the number of young people completing an apprenticeship. A higher number of care leavers are in education, employment or training than similar authorities and the national average. The 'Having a Life' survey of young people continues to provide a rich source of baseline information.

The quality of monitoring in the one further education college has improved with a new senior management team and a strong focus on self-evaluation. The Tynedale Virtual College is broadening the provision and accessibility of vocational courses. A 14-19 quality assurance strategy, framework and working group are increasing flexibility and encouraging access to alternative provision.

The authority rightly acknowledges that the target for engaging young people who are not in education, employment or training has not been met, reflecting the national picture. The number of young people identified as not in education, employment or training has risen from 7.9% to 10.1%. The council and its partners are taking substantial action, for example introducing more targeted child care provision. Three quarters of first schools have access to child care provision and the neighbourhood nursery target has been exceeded. A large expansion of children's centres is taking place in the most deprived areas.

The council is right to see 14–19 as a continuing area for improvement together with raising the overall numbers of learners aged 16 to 18. The authority recognises the 14–19 partnership plan should include actions to secure successful outcomes for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The rate of participation in work-based learning by young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is low at 7% compared with 15.2% nationally, and the success rate is also low. Opportunities for young people to engage in vocational education at an early age are expanding in secondary schools. Advice and guidance about career development is good.

Access to appropriate post-16 education and training remains an issue partly because of the rural nature of the authority. Work has been undertaken to address this through the development of the Tynedale Virtual College but some young people have to travel long distances to access the course they want. The authority's review of the post-16 transport policy has reduced access to subsidised travel by train and has led to a number of complaints.

Areas for development

- Reduce the proportion of young people not engaged in education, training or employment.
- Improve access to appropriate post-16 education and training.
- Ensure the 14–19 partnership plan includes actions to secure successful outcomes for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Capacity to improve, including the management of services for children and young people

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The capacity of the council to improve its services for children and young people is good. Senior leaders and managers provide a strong sense of direction and extensive consultation with all children and young people, and a transparent approach to decision-making.

Progress since the last annual performance assessment is good. For example, the recent joint area review found the way the analysis of needs informed service priorities, service delivery, and improved outcomes was better, although there were gaps in relation to some of the precise actions, targets and resources to deliver priorities. Some plans are not always clear about the expected outcomes they are seeking to achieve.

Joint developments between schools and the council such as the 14 local partnerships which are part of the putting the learner first initiative are making a good impact. The 2006 Children and Young People's Plan shows more effective prioritisation although monitoring of the impact of action taken remains an issue.

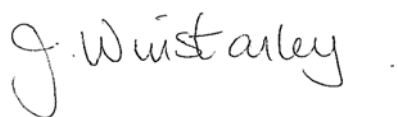
The joint area review found that there was a clear focus on improving the good value for money already achieved. Financial resources are well managed. Financial management of children's services is improving, with successful work undertaken to bring critical budgets under control in some areas of high spending such as external fostering placements. The council's annual financial settlement is well below the national average yet resources are used well to produce good outcomes for children and young people. Against this background, more robust arrangements to improve value for money have been put in place.

Areas for development

- Monitoring of the impact of action taken to make improvements.
- Clearer identification of outcomes in plans.

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". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small dot at the end.

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager
Local Services Inspection