

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London WC2B 6SE

T 08456 40 40 40
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 0161 618 8207
Direct F 0161 618 8514
North_apa@ofsted.gov.uk



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Mr Trevor Doughty
Director of Children's Services
Northumberland County Council
Children's Services Directorate
County Hall
Morpeth
NE61 2EF

Dear Mr Doughty

Annual performance assessment of services for children and young people in Northumberland County Council 2008

This letter summarises the findings of the 2008 annual performance assessment (APA) for your council. The evaluations and judgements in the letter draw on a range of data and information which covers the period 1 April 2007 to 31 March 2008. As you know, the APA is not based on an inspection of your services and, therefore, can only provide a snapshot based on the evidence considered. As such, I am grateful to you for assuring the quality of the data provided.

Performance is judged on a four point scale as detailed in the handbook.

I should emphasise that the grades awarded are based on an overall 'best fit' model. For instance, an outstanding judgement of Grade 4 reflects that overall most aspects, but not necessarily all, of the services in the area are working very well. We know that one of the features of outstanding provision is the drive for greater improvement and no council would suggest, and nor would Ofsted, that a judgement of outstanding indicates that everything is perfect. Similarly within a judgement of inadequate overall, Grade 1, there could be some aspects of the overall service that are adequate or even good. Judgements are made in a rounded way, balancing all of the evidence and giving due consideration to outcomes, local and national contexts, priorities and decision-making.



The following table sets out the grades awarded for performance in 2008.

Assessment judgement area	APA grade
Overall effectiveness of children's services	3
Being healthy	3
Staying safe	4
Enjoying and achieving	3
Making a positive contribution	4
Achieving economic well-being	3
Capacity to improve, including the management of services for children and young people	4

*Inspectors make judgements based on the following scale
4: outstanding/excellent; 3: good; 2: adequate; 1: inadequate*

Overall effectiveness of children’s services

Grade 3

Northumberland County Council delivers good services for children and young people. The council’s capacity to improve is outstanding. It has maintained good performance in all areas, and improved very well in the outcomes for staying safe and making a positive contribution. The council is making good progress overall in improving the achievement and well-being of young people, for example standards are improving well at most key stages. Attainment at Key Stage 2 is less impressive with standards below those found in similar council areas.

Outcomes for the health and well-being of children and young people continue to improve overall. Progress in staying safe is excellent and the contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is now outstanding.

Being healthy

Grade 3

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. The council’s analysis of its strengths and areas for development for this outcome area is consistent with the evidence.

<p>Major strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The teenage conception rate remains below that of national and similar councils. The reduction in the number of conceptions since 1998 in Northumberland is greater (-14.1%) than in similar councils (-13.0%) and the England average (-13.3%). ▪ The percentage of health assessments provided for looked after children is very high (96%) and compares very favourably with similar councils and the national average. ▪ Comprehensive services and action ensure young people under the age of 18 receive timely and appropriate access to substance misuse treatment.
<p>Important weaknesses and areas for development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The proportion of mothers initiating breast-feeding is 50.8% compared to a benchmark group average of 71% and an England average of 69.6%. Following a rise of 4% in the previous recorded year the rate has actually fallen this year. ▪ Whilst good progress has been made towards the development of a comprehensive child and adolescent mental health service, waiting times for some services remain high.

Staying safe

Grade 4

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is outstanding. The council’s analysis of its strengths and areas for development for this outcome area is consistent with the evidence.

Major Strengths

- Very good arrangements placing children for adoption are ensuring that all are placed within 12 months, with 13.2% of looked after children being adopted in 2007/08 compared to similar councils (9.4%) and the average nationally (8.8%).
- A high proportion of looked after children live in stable foster placements and in the most recent inspection (2007) the fostering service was judged to be good.
- The number of repeat referrals has reduced in the past year, and is now significantly lower at 11.4% than similar councils and England at 25%. This indicator has consistently been lower than similar councils since 2004/05.
- The timeliness of initial and core assessments have increased as part of an overall improving trend. This is a particularly significant strength as the numbers of initial and core assessments being undertaken have also increased.
- Looked after children have their care plans reviewed in a timely manner. This performance is better than that found nationally.
- All children's homes are good.
- The council run secure unit is good overall with some outstanding features.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

Enjoying and achieving

Grade 3

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. The council's analysis of its strengths and areas for development for this outcome area is consistent with the evidence.

Major strengths

- High quality of child care, early years, and Foundation Stage provision.
- Standards at Key Stages 1, 3, and 4 are above national averages and continue to improve.
- A smaller proportion of schools are in a category compared to similar councils and the average nationally.
- Children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are making better progress.
- Attendance in secondary schools is above the level found in similar council areas.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- Attainment at Key Stage 2 is below similar councils in English and mathematics.

Making a positive contribution

Grade 4

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is outstanding. The council's analysis of its strengths and areas for development for this outcome area is consistent with the evidence.

<p>Major strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ High and increasing proportion of supervised juveniles are in full-time employment, education or training. ▪ High numbers of children and young people access publicly funded youth services. In 2007 the council exceeded the national target of 25% by 16.7%, reaching 10679 young people. The number of young people (39.7%) accessing publicly funded youth services is significantly greater than the national average (28%). ▪ There has been a significant reduction (24.8%) in the number of first time entrants into the youth justice system between April 2006 and March 2008. This significantly exceeds the national target of a 5% reduction.
<p>Important weaknesses and areas for development</p>

Achieving economic well-being

Grade 3

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. The council's analysis of its strengths and areas for development for this outcome area is consistent with the evidence.

<p>Major strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Participation in education and work-based learning has significantly improved and compares favourably with similar council areas. ▪ Support for care leavers and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to enter employment, education and training is good. ▪ The percentage of 19-year-olds achieving Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications is greater than in similar council areas. ▪ Participation rates for 16- to 18-year olds in learning continue to increase. ▪ The number of young people completing an apprenticeship (67.5%) is significantly above similar council areas (29.7%) and nationally (47.7%).
<p>Important weaknesses and areas for development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The percentage of young people not engaged in education, training or employment (8.1%) is above similar council areas (6.7%).

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

Grade 4

The capacity of the council to improve its services for children and young people is outstanding and its management of these services is good. The council has demonstrated a strong track record of improvement in the last three years and progress in two areas; staying safe and making a positive contribution, are now outstanding. Measures to improve attainment at Key Stage 2 and to ensure a fully comprehensive mental health service for children and young people are progressing well.

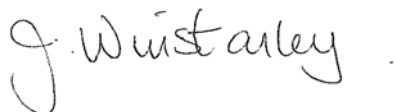
The council has significantly strengthened capacity to improve since 2005. It is moving forward at a more rapid pace with the needs of children and young people at the centre of all developments.

Major strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Good track record of improvement in many areas identified as weaknesses in the last few years. This is the result of a sharp focus on priorities based on thorough analysis of need. ▪ Sustained upward trend in performance with many indicators consistently better than those found in similar council areas.
Important weaknesses and areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Key Stage 2 results are below those found in similar council areas.

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.

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.

Yours sincerely



Juliet Winstanley
 Divisional Manager
 Local Services Inspection