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Making Social Care
Better for People



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Dear Mr Doughty

2006 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

This letter summarises the findings of the 2006 annual performance assessment (APA) process for your local authority. We are grateful for the information which you provided to support this process and for the time made available by yourself and your colleagues to discuss relevant issues.

Summary

Areas for judgement	Grade awarded ¹
The contribution of <i>the local authority's children's services</i> in maintaining and improving outcomes for children and young people	3
The council's overall <i>capacity to improve</i> its services for children and young people	3
The contribution of <i>the local authority's social care services</i> in maintaining and improving outcomes for children and young people	3

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Grade	Service descriptors	Capacity to improve descriptors
4	A service that delivers well above minimum requirements for users	Excellent / outstanding
3	A service that consistently delivers above minimum requirements for users	Good
2	A service that delivers only minimum requirements for users	Adequate
1	A service that does not deliver minimum requirements for users	Inadequate

Northumberland County Council consistently delivers above minimum requirements for children and young people. All services can demonstrate how they are improving the achievement and well-being of children and young people and substantial action has been taken to improve the areas identified in last year's APA. The pace of innovation and development since the previous APA has been rapid but many changes have yet to make a full impact. The authority now has strengths in all key aspects of its work and has good capacity to improve services further. The council has a clear view of its own strengths and areas for improvement in order to continue to raise the quality of provision and standards.

Being healthy

The contribution the authority makes towards improving the health of children and young people in the area is good. Improvement in this outcome since the previous APA is significant and the delivery of services is more integrated. The planning and delivery of services for looked after children are more integrated. There is greater access to a wider range of health performance information. The authority recognises the need to analyse the information and data in more depth to identify trends and patterns. Access to, and take up of, substance misuse services are good and the health of looked after children is better than the national picture except for dental registration where there are difficulties registering looked after children with dental practices. Youth offending service (YOS) mental health performance is good with referrals for both acute and non-acute difficulties at a high level.

The development of a comprehensive Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) has reduced waiting lists and removed restrictive criteria. The authority recognises there is still work to do making further improvements, in particular to 'tier 3' and also to the therapy services for children with learning disabilities. The incidence of teenage pregnancy is lower than it was at the time of the previous APA. However, the authority acknowledges this as an area for improvement and is taking appropriate action to drive developments forward, for example through initiatives such as the Healthy Schools Programme. Judgements from school inspections show that the promotion of health awareness is consistently good in all phases and types of school.

Staying safe

The authority makes a good contribution towards promoting and securing the safety of children and young people. Performance is consistently good but there are some aspects, such as the length of time children and young people remain on the child protection register (CPR), which requires further analysis and improvement because the length of time does not compare well with the national picture.

Children and young people have been actively engaged through the 'Having A Life' survey, school councils, and the Healthy Schools Programme to identify their priorities and concerns. These priorities have strongly informed the development of the Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP) and the local area agreements.

The authority has invested resources in analysing information and trends on children and young people who are referred for services such as the need to be looked after. Newly

refined processes and systems are more able to differentiate between contacts and referrals and there is a significant reduction in the numbers of referrals and re-referrals as a result.

There has been a reduction in the number of children on the CPR in the last three years which has stabilised in the last year. All children and young people on the register have an allocated social worker. Every child protection case is reviewed and, although performance is good, further scrutiny is needed of the length of time children remain on the register.

The authority has taken steps to reduce the number of looked after children through more rigorous monitoring. The numbers remain high and further work is needed to ensure sustained progress. The balance between residential and foster care across the looked-after population has improved as a result of the priority given to a recruitment campaign for foster carers and the effective use of a placement panel. However, the long term stability of placements for looked after children remains an area for improvement.

Enjoying and achieving

The authority takes adequate steps to ensure children and young people achieve at school and enjoy their education. Substantial action has been taken to address the areas for improvement identified in last year's APA. It is too early to see the full impact, although improvement in many service areas is evident. The areas for improvement are accurately identified in the self-assessment and the action taken, particularly in education services, is raising standards and the quality of provision.

The overall quality of early years provision is good and is rigorously monitored. Results at the end of Key Stage 1 are very good. Results at Key Stage 2 continue to be around and just below national averages and are improving as a result of the effective support provided to schools by the children's directorate. The authority is closely monitoring progress between the key stages and it knows that results at the end of Key Stage 2 are rising.

Standards at Key Stage 3 and 4 are slightly above the national average and rising. The 'Putting the Learner First' initiative is at the heart of many developments designed to raise achievement and standards, especially at Key Stage 2 and in parts of the south east of the county at Key Stage 4 where fewer students achieve the higher grades at GCSE than elsewhere in the county. It is already making an impact with groups of schools in different parts of the authority making proposals to become 'federations'. Plans for the first area to move from a three tier school system to 11–16 are going ahead in the next year.

Attendance is good overall and the authority has stabilised the attendance of looked after children. It is aware that they are not achieving as well as they should compared with national standards. This is identified as a priority in the self-assessment and appropriate action is being taken to raise standards. Unauthorised absence is below average.

No schools have been placed in a formal category of concern by Ofsted. The position was the same last year and the school improvement strategy continues to support weaker schools effectively.

The council's provision of youth and community facilities was an area for improvement in the previous APA and the authority was seeking to increase the involvement of young people. As a result, it has developed an integrated youth services framework and put it into practice. The focus has switched to delivering the framework and achieving more consistent outcomes. The authority rightly sees this as an area for future improvement and has made significant inroads to making it happen.

Making a positive contribution

Performance in this outcome area is good and improvement has led to more consultation with children and young people. Policies have been widely developed and implemented across a range of forums to include vulnerable groups; for example, the consultation of children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

There are good working relationships between the YOS and the wider children's services with an appropriate range of opportunities for young people at risk of offending. Further improvement is anticipated and an effective approach to final warnings of looked after children has been maintained. The authority's performance in reviews for looked after children is good and a high level of reviews are completed in statutory timescales.

The judgements from school inspections show the majority of schools are good at making a positive contribution through the Healthy School Programme and participation in the development of the CYPP. A significant number of actions in relation to learning difficulties and/or disabilities were identified through inspection in the range of full day care services. The authority is working towards improving them.

Achieving economic well-being

The authority makes a good contribution to children and young people's economic well-being through a wide range of partnerships including the local Learning and Skills Council and local businesses. The higher than average number of care leavers in education, employment and training and the quality of their 'pathway plans' have improved. The 'Having a Life' survey of young people provided a rich source of baseline information and authority plans to gather and analyse further information.

The quality of monitoring has improved and a 14–19 quality assurance framework is being trialled. The use of the framework has already resulted in a wider range of options being available in sixth forms. The 14–19 strategy is increasing flexibility and encouraging access to alternative provision, for example in the Tynedale Virtual College. Monitoring at the one further education (FE) college is less well advanced. The authority recognises this, and effective support is helping the college to become more self-evaluative.

Although the target for engaging young people who are not in education, employment or training was not met, this position reflects the national picture. The authority is not complacent and is right to see this as an area for improvement, together with raising the overall numbers of learners aged 16–18.

The council's management of its services for children and young people, including its capacity to improve them further

The authority is working closely with relevant key providers and stakeholders to analyse needs and set appropriate targets and priorities. These priorities are clearly set out in the CYPP. The engagement of children, young people and their families has been a main concern in the development of these plans. Discussion with the authority demonstrates that it has a good understanding of its strengths and areas for improvement. It has established integrated working systems and has a clear strategy for the implementation of integrated teams. It is in the process of engaging partners to develop leadership and the common assessment framework across all services.

Rates for the recruitment and retention of qualified social workers are good and there has been investment in building and developing internal capacity within the residential sector. Although individual managers monitor sickness levels, there are no central monitoring processes or systems to allow scrutiny and analysis.

The budget for social services and specific spend on children's services is high and underpins the commitment to the delivery of the CYPP. A commissioning strategy is beginning to make an impact on the arrangements for commissioning services. It has still to make a significant impact on specific services such as the recruitment of foster carers and the use of the independent fostering sector.

Relationships with schools have significantly improved and the authority has in place plans for further developments. The authority's innovative approach to leadership and management is best exemplified in the radical and far reaching developments taking place in education services. Joint developments between schools and the authority are moving beyond the current agenda for change to a two tier system to federations of schools delivering education from 5–19.

Key strengths and areas for improvement

Key strengths	Key areas for improvement
<p><i>Being healthy:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increased capacity and uptake of substance misuse services • YOS mental health performance is good with referrals for both acute and non-acute difficulties at a high level • health and dental assessments of looked after children and young people • improved access to health performance information • more integrated planning and delivery for looked after children and young people • significant improvement in the promotion of healthy lifestyles in schools. 	<p><i>Being healthy:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • teenage conception rates • dental registration for looked after children • CAMHS – further strategic and operational (24/7 service, tier 3) development • analysis of health data • therapy services for children with learning disabilities.
<p><i>Staying safe:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • performance across a range of indicators relating to looked after children and young people • good performance across a range of child protection indicators • adoption timescales. 	<p><i>Staying safe:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • numbers of children and young people who are looked-after • stability of placements for long term looked after children and young people • the length of time children and young people remain on the CPR.
<p><i>Enjoying and achieving:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • early years provision improved • very good Key Stage 1 results • good support for those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities • Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 results improving. 	<p><i>Enjoying and achieving:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Results and value-added at Key Stage 2 • further improvements in the quality of youth service provision • achievement and attendance of looked after children.

<p><i>Making a positive contribution:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • numbers of looked after children and young people taking part in their own reviews • final warnings/reprimands and convictions of looked after children and young people • Ofsted's inspection of schools demonstrates that the majority of schools were good or adequate at making a positive contribution • good consultation and engagement processes for children and young people • focused survey of children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities as part of the 'Having A Life' survey. 	<p><i>Making a positive contribution:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • full day care – significant number of actions at point of inspection in relation to learning difficulties and/or disabilities.
<p><i>Achieving economic well-being:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • overall quality of monitoring • provision for care leavers • implementation of the 14–19 strategies • effective partnerships raising the number of care learners in education, employment or training. 	<p><i>Achieving economic well-being:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reducing the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training • monitoring of FE college provision • number of 16–18 year olds engaged in learning.
<p><i>Management of children's services:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • engaging partners in decision-making • development of an integrated performance management system • knowing strengths and weaknesses well through rigorous self-assessment • social services budget and specific spending on children's services. • training and skills levels for workers with children and young people. 	<p><i>Management of children's services:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • continue to improve relationships with schools • commissioning strategy for foster care including recruitment of foster carers and use of the independent sector • systems for monitoring and analysing staff sickness levels.

Aspects for focus in a future joint area review or the next APA

- How well the authority continues to engage with a range of partners and key stakeholders; for example schools, colleges, health, children, young people and their families.
- The extent to which the range of information available and the analysis of needs inform service priorities, service delivery and improves outcomes.
- The impact of the authority's actions to raise standards in schools particularly at Key Stage 2 and to reduce the number of young people not engaged in education, employment or training.

We confirm that the children's services grade will provide the score for the children and young people service block in the comprehensive performance assessment and will be published to the Audit Commission. The social care judgement is for CSCI information only.

Yours sincerely



FLO HADLEY

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JONATHAN PHILLIPS

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