

26 November 2007

Mrs Catherine Fitt  
Executive Director of Children's Services  
Newcastle upon Tyne City Council  
Room 243  
Civic Centre, Barras Bridge  
Newcastle upon Tyne

Dear Mrs Fitt

## **2007 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN NEWCASTLE-UPON-TYNE CITY COUNCIL**

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

### **Overall effectiveness of children's services**

### **Grade 2**

Newcastle upon Tyne local authority provides adequate services for children and young people. Children's services have responded positively to the recommendations raised in the joint area review report and have made steady progress since that time. There are significant social and economic challenges in the city because of profound levels of deprivation found in some areas. Many outcomes for children and young people are below the national average; however, there are signs of improvement during the last year. For example, in 2007 the proportion of young people gaining good grades at GCSE exceeded the national average for the first time. The proportion of 16- to 19-year-olds not in employment, education or training continues a significant downward trend. There has been significant improvement in the contribution made to health outcomes for children and young people and this area is now judged to be good. The authority has made significant changes to its services for children and young people as a result of an increasingly accurate analysis of its performance. There is a strong shared determination to improve services but in many cases it is too soon to fully judge the impact of recent changes on children and young people.

## Being healthy

## Grade 3

### Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the council's services to improve outcomes for children and young people in this aspect has improved and is now good. The following recommendations for action were highlighted in the joint area review report.

### For action in the next sixth months

- Evaluate the impact of the strategies to reduce obesity levels in children and young people, reduce teenage conception rates and reduce the levels of smoking among expectant mothers.

The council and its partners have reviewed and evaluated their various strategies to reduce child obesity. Neighbourhood Renewal Funding has been secured for the Leaner East project which targets higher obesity levels in Newcastle East. The council has adopted a multi-stranded approach to tackle obesity, and has prioritised community engagement as a foundation for this initiative. A robust independent evaluation of the project has been commissioned which will provide evidence of impact mid-way through 2008.

The Teenage Conception Strategy and Partnership Board have been reviewed and revised. There has been research into best practice in other authorities. Services have re-focussed on prevention rather than a concentration on support to teenage parents. The 2005 data shows a good reduction in teenage conception rates but the council understands the great challenges faced in achieving national targets by 2010.

Some 58 schools gained the national Healthy Schools award exceeding the council's target of 50. Oral health for under-fives in the city is good with children having significantly fewer missing or decayed teeth. There has been good progress in lowering levels of smoking amongst expectant mothers which has decreased by 7.3% and at 21.8% is now just above similar authorities.

The council recognises that breast-feeding initiation rates continue to be significantly low and levels of sexual infection, including Chlamydia, are high. Good progress is being made in tackling these issues. There have been significant changes in sexual health services including the establishment of an outreach team, increased accessibility and alignment of services, and the launch in April 2007 of the Chlamydia screening service.

### Area for development

- Strengthen sexual health services to decrease the levels of sexual infection; and improve breast-feeding initiation rates.

## **Staying safe**

## **Grade 2**

### **Summary of strengths and areas for development**

The contribution of the council's services to improve outcomes for children and young people in this aspect remains adequate. While improvements to services are evident as a result of action implemented since the joint area review, evidence of improved outcomes has yet to be fully demonstrated. The following recommendations for action were highlighted in the joint area review report.

#### **For immediate action**

- Agree and implement appropriate and consistent thresholds for referral to social care.

#### **For action in the next six months**

- Develop and implement a strategic and co-ordinated approach to services for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities taking into account young peoples' views.

#### **For action over the longer term**

- Increase the number of foster care placements for children from ethnic minorities.

The council has made secure progress in the establishment of agreed thresholds for referrals to social care but acknowledges that there is still work to be done particularly in the application of these thresholds amongst partners in children's services. Referral rates to social care remain significantly higher than the national average at 1,235 children per 10,000 but the rapid increase over recent years is slowing. The re-organisation of social care teams was completed recently. The screening team, initial response service, assessment and monitoring service and looked after children social work service are now in place. The impact of a pilot risk assessment tool introduced in September 2007 as a result of the high volume of domestic violence referrals has yet to be measured. Newly appointed locality managers have been given the responsibility of implementing the early intervention and prevention strategy, including improving induction and safeguarding training to ensure consistent use of thresholds. Rates of initial assessments completed within the seven day timescale remain low. The council is completing core assessments at a level well above national and similar area figures. These greatly increased last year. Completion rates within the 35 day timescale are well below average but improved last year. Improved outcomes resulting from reshaping services into dedicated specialist teams and improvements in staffing and vacancy levels remain to be seen.

During 2006-07, there were significantly high and increased rates of initial child protection conferences, with a much higher than average proportion of children becoming the subject of child protection plans. The council believes that this reflects levels of need and deprivation in the city and increased awareness of domestic violence and parental substance misuse. The joint area review report recognised increasing levels of multi-agency working and the high priority given to the safeguarding agenda. All children and young people who are the subject of child protection plans have allocated social workers and the timeliness of child protection reviews continues to be good.

A high proportion of looked after children and young people are placed with foster carers and there is good performance in terms of adoption orders for children and young people where this meets their best interests. There is a satisfactory level of stability in terms of the placements of looked after children and young people. The number of children and young people who have had three or more placements during the year is below the national average and the proportion living continuously in the same placement or foster home is above the national average. The continuing high proportion of children and young people in placements out of area is being tackled through the establishment of a placements panel and a gate-keeping and resource panel. An Invest to Save strategy to increase the pool of in-house carers has been established to ensure resources are prioritised appropriately. The joint area review identified the need to increase the availability of carers from Black and minority ethnic groups. The council responded by engaging in the regional Sahara initiative. As a result of the fostering service's recruitment initiatives one new approval has been made, two assessments are in progress, and two other carers are being trained.

There is a clear plan that has already started to address the joint area review recommendation to develop a strategic and coordinated approach to services for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The plan will be assessed and reviewed in December 2007.

School inspections carried out last year judged that the extent to which students adopted safe practices was good in the vast majority of cases and inadequate in none. The number of children and young people killed or seriously injured in road traffic accidents in 2005 was 46% below the 1994-98 average for the local authority.

### **Areas for development**

- Improve the timeliness of child protection assessments.
- Strengthen the consistency of the use of common threshold criteria for referral to social care.

## Enjoying and achieving

## Grade 2

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect remains adequate. Some improvements are evident as a result of action implemented since the joint area review, although there are still some significant areas where improvements are needed. The following recommendations for action were highlighted in the joint area review report.

### For immediate action

- Ensure that pupils permanently excluded from school are placed speedily in other schools or alternative provision.

### For action in the longer term

- Ensure that the progress of all groups of pupils, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, is reported appropriately, to celebrate achievement and enable an evaluation of value for money.

The council has responded well to the joint area review recommendation with regard to excluded pupils by ensuring that all permanently excluded pupils are immediately placed on the roll of the city's pupil referral unit or alternative education provision for older pupils at Oakfield Solutions. Further work is necessary to measure the success of these new arrangements on outcomes for young people. The council has allocated a school improvement partner to the pupil referral unit. The proportion of pupils with fixed term exclusions is below the national average but it remains above the average for those permanently excluded. Relatively few of these children and young people return to mainstream education. The council recognises this as an important issue and re-designated a manager to become Head of Inclusion in September and prioritising this as an area for urgent action.

There has been good progress in response to the joint area review recommendation that the progress of all groups of pupils, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is celebrated. Elected members of the council have been more closely involved in this process and a more wide-ranging and effective media campaign has taken place. The linkage between the achievement of children young people and value for money is part of a wider analysis that is taking place. There are several initiatives that aim to share good practice between special schools.

Children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities who receive additional support do well when compared to similar children and young people nationally. Attainment of 7- and 11-year-old pupils has improved significantly as a result of targeted intervention in some schools; however, standards overall remain below the national average. At age 14 the proportion of pupils achieving levels 5 and 6 and above in English is particularly low with no trend of continuous improvement.

The proportion of young people achieving five or more good GCSE passes has continued to improve and according to the latest council data has now risen to above the national average in the maintained sector for the first time. The council recognises that low levels of attainment in mathematics and English is a key priority for action.

Children and young people's attendance at school is satisfactory overall. Effective work is taking place to reduce absence rates in particular targeted areas, families and schools. There is particularly good celebration of high attendance rates.

The number of schools who are a cause for concern has decreased. There are no secondary schools subject to special measures or a notice to improve. The council is using its statutory powers to consult about the closure of a school that has failed to make sufficient progress following placement into special measures.

### **Areas for development**

- Improve the overall achievement rates in mathematics and English.
- Ensure that arrangements to permanently exclude children and young people from schools are applied appropriately and that children and young people who are permanently excluded make sufficient progress.

### **Making a positive contribution**

### **Grade 2**

The contribution of the council's services to improve outcomes for children and young people in this aspect remains adequate. Although some improvement is evident as a result of actions implemented since the joint area review, there are still some actions that have yet to show impact. The following recommendations for action were highlighted in the joint area review report.

### **For action in the next six months**

- Strengthen the corporate parenting arrangements through increased involvement of looked after children and young people in the decisions about, and evaluation of, services for them.
- Establish procedures to monitor and evaluate the impact of strategies to reduce anti-social behaviour and offending.
- Work with adult social services to meet the needs of young carers and their families so that their children and young people can lead lives that are as normal as possible.

The council has established a corporate parenting advisory committee, including seven elected members, as well as a participation steering group for looked after children and young people. During 2007 two looked after children's participation

conferences have been held which have resulted in identification of key priorities. There is strong evidence that the views of looked after children and young people have influenced service development. For example views about support from social workers have influenced the reshaping of social care into dedicated teams. A looked after children's recruitment panel has been established. A Corporate Parenting Strategy is due for completion by March 2008 and corporate parenting materials are to be developed to increase awareness and understanding across the wider council. There has been progress on the monitoring and evaluation of the impact of strategies to reduce anti-social behaviour and offending and the council is able to provide evidence of some improved outcomes. The anti-social behaviour pilot in schools has promoted and raised awareness of the importance of a consistent approach to anti-social behaviour. The pilot has resulted in improved outcomes in terms of reduced criminal behaviour, exclusion levels and safer environments, with an increase in school satisfaction levels. This successful pilot is now being introduced in all secondary schools. The rate of re-offending amongst young people has declined although the number of first time entrants to the youth justice system remains fairly stable and is above the national average.

Work with adult services to meet the needs of young carers is being improved through a programme of awareness raising and training, attended so far by 120 staff. The "Changing Tracks" service was established in April 2007 and is designed to prevent young carers becoming looked after children. A designated teacher with responsibility for young carers is being identified in all schools. Work has commenced to develop an information sharing protocol. There is active involvement of young carers in this work, including contribution to the development of the Young Carers' strategy, consultations on the most effective type of support and involvement in recruitment panels.

### **Area for development**

- Measure the impact of the recent key strategies and actions that have been introduced to improve the positive contribution by young people; including the corporate parenting strategy, the looked after children conferences, information sharing protocols for young carers, and the anti-social behaviour pilot project.

## **Achieving economic well-being**

## **Grade 2**

The contribution of the council's services to improve outcomes for children and young people in this aspect remains adequate, although some improvements are evident as a result of action implemented since the joint area review. The following recommendations for action were highlighted in the joint area review report.

### **For action in the next sixth months**



- Implement fully the recommendations of the 14–19 area inspection through the harmonisation and integration of the plans for 11- to 19-year-olds.
- Improve the vocational options for young people over the age of 18 with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

The council has responded well to the recommendations of the joint area review by devising and implementing an integrated youth strategy. The recommendations of the 14–19 area inspection have been subsumed into this strategy and been integrated with overall plans for 11- to 19-year-olds. Extensive consultation with stakeholder groups took place last year and an action plan put into place. The Connexions service will move over to become the responsibility of the authority in April 2008. The proportion of young people aged 16 to 18 who are not in employment, education or training has continued on its downward trend and compares well with similar authorities, although for those over age 19 the trend is not as good. There is a higher proportion of young people whose current employment or training status is not known than in comparable authorities. There is particularly good progression into employment, education or training for looked after children and young people although the proportion from minority ethnic backgrounds not in education or training is higher than similar authorities.

A stakeholder group has been established to improve the vocational options for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. A mapping exercise has been carried out that has resulted in better information being made available to young people and their parents. As yet there is little evidence available to measure improvement in participation rates as a result of these initiatives.

There has been good collaboration between providers of education and training to set up a firm basis for the introduction of the 14–19 diplomas. Overall the achievement of young people in sixth forms is above that of similar authorities. However, there is considerable variation between schools. Results at the local college of further education are particularly good at Level 1 and Level 3. Achievement in work based learning provision is in line with the low national average.

In terms of priorities for the future, the council has accurately identified that improving the literacy and numeracy skills of young people will be crucial to the improvement of their economic well-being. As a result of recent initiatives some young people have already begun to achieve literacy and numeracy qualifications at Level 1 and 2.

### **Areas for development**

- Improve the literacy and numeracy skills of young people so that they are well equipped for employment, further education or training.



- Determine more precisely the progression routes of young people at age 16.

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

**Grade 3**

### **Summary of strengths and areas for development**

The council's capacity to improve its services for children and young people is good. There has been much improvement since the joint area review because of good management of services. One recommendation emerged from the joint area review.

### **For action in the next six months**

- Develop links between priorities for improvement and the available resources to deliver improvement.

Since the joint area review was carried out processes and structures have changed to ensure a closer link between priorities and funding. There continues to be a strong focus on improvement. There have been significant improvements to the outcomes for children and young people in terms of being healthy. The council has improved its structures using a co-ordinated approach to the development of multi-disciplinary teams. There are still significant challenges in social care, particularly in maintaining support for the high number of looked after children and young people and ensuring the correct balance between early intervention and accurate assessment.

Performance in education remains adequate. There are several areas where improvement has taken place and few where performance has fallen back. However considerable challenges still remain. In particular in raising achievement in English and mathematics at all ages.

Improvement trends are beginning to show through, particularly in GCSE results and the health of children and young people. An adequate self evaluation process is in place. However some of the new strategies for improvement have not yet been sufficiently measured in terms of outcomes for young people. The work force development strategy has had significant impact on staffing structures. Effective action has taken place in response to the immediate and six month joint area review recommendations. The council is optimistic that the effect of the considerable changes that have taken place will become apparent in the next year and that outcomes for children and young people will significantly improve.

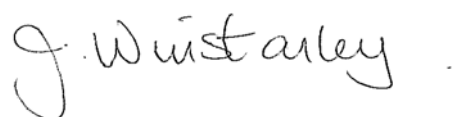
### **Area for development**

- Develop a comprehensive self evaluation process that links the impact of new strategies to improved outcomes for children and young people.

Overall the council has demonstrated good progress in meeting the joint area review recommendations and has shown a good capacity to maintain and improve further its services for children and young people.

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 "J. Winstanley".

Juliet Winstanley  
Divisional Manager  
Local Services Inspections