

26 November 2007

Mrs Adrienne Simcock
Director of Children's Services
Hartlepool Borough Council
Civic Centre
Victoria Road
Hartlepool
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Dear Mrs Simcock

2007 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN HARTLEPOOL BOROUGH 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 for the time given by you and your colleagues during the assessment.

Overall effectiveness of children's services

Grade 3

Hartlepool Borough Council consistently delivers above minimum standards. The council has responded positively to the recommendations raised in the joint area review report and has made good progress since that time. Its services for children and young people are well coordinated and managed. There is a clear focus upon, and a commitment to, improving the lives and life opportunities of children and young people across Hartlepool. The council capitalises on the advantages of the small size of the authority and adopts appropriate strategies to meet the challenges this brings. Outcomes are improving and are generally better than those achieved in similar areas. Children and young people's views are sought and increasingly used to influence decisions. Their needs are rigorously assessed and services personalised so that each individual can be healthy, be safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being. The local authority knows its strengths and has a clear appreciation of what it needs to do to improve further. A number of significant factors demonstrate the council's good capacity to improve: the quality of senior leadership and management, very strong partnership working and the overall trend in improvements which have led to the good progress made since the joint area review.

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 aspect is good. One recommendation emerged from the joint area review.

For action over the longer term

- Improve the provision of occupational therapy and speech and language therapy services.

Since the joint area review, the council, working with schools and its own special educational needs service, has increased the provision of occupational therapy and speech and language therapy services.

Good progress has been made in schools achieving national Healthy Schools Status and participation levels are very good, both being above comparator councils and the national average. No early years providers were issued with actions relating to health at registration or at inspection. Performance in this area is also better than comparators and the national average. There is good performance by schools in enabling learners to be healthy with most judged to be good or outstanding.

The conception rate amongst 15–17 year olds has risen and is well above that of comparator councils and the national average. Historically Hartlepool has had high levels of teenage pregnancies and although a well-founded teenage pregnancy strategy is in place, its impact has been limited. The council has performed better in reducing the number of conceptions for under 16 year olds, which is now generally in line with comparator councils. The council has identified and is now targeting resources at 17 year olds in order to reduce conception rates for this age group. The numbers of mothers choosing to breast-feed continues to improve but are significantly lower than comparators. The percentage of mothers known to smoke through pregnancy has dropped steadily, although this remains higher than comparator councils and the national average. All GP surgeries provide services to monitor children's health. Access to health visiting and midwifery services, which are delivered from children's centres across the borough, has improved. Chlamydia screening programmes, delivered from a number of community settings, are now well established and this has improved identification and early treatment.

Healthcare for looked after children and young people is good; for example, the number receiving an annual health check is better than comparators and the national average. Social care services for children and young people employ a designated nurse for looked after children and vulnerable children and this has led to improved communication and integrated working.

There is good access to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) for looked after children and young offenders, and 24-hour coverage for children and

young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The CAMHS deals with new non-specialist cases, which need to be seen within 26 weeks, more quickly than happens nationally. However, there has been a small deterioration in the percentage of CAMHS new cases which are seen within four weeks. The drugs education team, which is jointly commissioned with two other councils, works effectively with the healthy schools team. Screening, referral and early intervention processes for substance misuse are in place for all key risk groups.

Areas for development

- Reduce the number of teenage conceptions for 17 year olds.
- Improve the breast-feeding take-up rates.
- Reduce the proportion of expectant mothers smoking during pregnancy.

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 aspect is good. Two recommendations emerged from the joint area review.

For immediate action

- Develop inter-agency guidance in relation to thresholds for referrals for children's social care.

For action in the next six months

- Improve joint commissioning and contracting arrangements in relation to out of authority placements for looked after children.

The council has made very good progress and has effectively addressed these two joint area review recommendations. Since the joint area review, the council has developed and implemented guidance in relation to thresholds for referrals for children and young people's social care. A comprehensive review has been undertaken of joint commissioning and contracting arrangements and budgets for out-of-borough placements have been aligned.

The local children and young people's safeguarding board is well established. Additional funding has been agreed with member agencies to employ a training officer and a development officer to further develop the board's remit. Good arrangements are in place to share information and multi-agency public protection arrangements work well.

There has been an increase in the number of referrals made to the council. Referral rates are significantly higher than comparator and national averages. However, the

number of referrals that proceed to an initial assessment has fallen and is well below the level of comparator councils. This would indicate that systems to screen initial referrals at the time of receipt are not sufficiently robust to separate out appropriate referrals from other contacts made. The council achieves good performance in respect of the percentage of re-referrals that are repeat referrals within 12 months. This is better than comparator councils and the national average. The number of core assessments undertaken has fallen but remains comparatively high in relation to similar councils and the national picture. The council's performance in the number of initial assessments carried out within seven days and core assessments within 35 days is very good and is above both comparator and national figures. The number of initial child protection case conferences has continued to fall, although this is still above the level of comparator councils and the national average. The number of children who are the subject of a child protection plan or who are on the Child Protection Register as at 31 March, rose in 2006-07 to a level which is significantly above comparator councils and the national average. However, across the year there has been a fall in the number of children who became subject of a child protection plan, or who were registered, significantly closing the gap between Hartlepool and comparator councils.

The number of children and young people killed or seriously injured in road accidents has reduced by 58% from the 1994-98 average; this is better than comparator councils and the national average.

The welfare of looked after children and young people is safeguarded well and all looked after children and young people are allocated to a qualified social worker. The council has seen an above average rise in the numbers of looked after children and young people, but only a small number are accommodated in residential placements because the council has arranged more appropriate foster care. This is a better performance than similar councils and the national average. There has been a fall in the number of children fostered by relatives and friends. However, this reduction needs to be viewed within the context of the council's support for the use of residence orders. The fostering service received an inspection judgement of good with regard to staying safe.

Areas for development

- Improve performance management systems for social care.
- Reduce the numbers of looked after children and young people.

Enjoying and achieving

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 aspect is good. Two recommendations emerged from the joint area review.

For action in the next six months

- Improve the quality of provision for children and young people with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties in order to meet their needs.
- Improve the quality of provision for pupils excluded from secondary schools and the rates of re-integration into mainstream schools.

The council has taken urgent and appropriate action to meet the findings of the joint area review and significant improvements have already been made in relation to both recommendations.

Overall outcomes for children and young people are improving. Educational standards are above the national average and are in line with or above similar councils. Gaps in attainment between different groups are narrowing, though the performance of boys at all key stages remains an area of concern especially in relation to literacy. In 2006, there were improvements in pupils' performance. There was an increase in the proportion of young people attaining Level 5 or above at Key Stage 3 in mathematics and science, for example, and a rise in the proportion of young people gaining five A* to C grades at GCSE. However, despite such improvements, the figures for children and young people gaining key levels of attainment are lower than national averages; for example, Level 5 or above in English, mathematics and science at Key Stage 3, and gaining five good grades at GCSE including English and mathematics. The authority is clear in its ambition of wanting to secure further improvements in standards and its plans and actions reflect this priority. Intervention strategies are in place to tackle such issues as secondary standards and boys' writing and the council's recent analysis indicates that some progress is being made.

Under a Service Level Agreement, Catcote Special School is making provision to meet the needs of secondary aged children and young people with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. Formal consultations are now taking place regarding the longer term designation of the school from 2008 to accommodate those secondary pupils who would benefit. A Primary Behaviour Group has been formed and is working with primary schools to agree provision for primary aged pupils with similar educational needs.

The council has taken speedy and robust action to improve provision for excluded pupils. There is one pupil referral unit in the authority, which is part of the Access to Learning (A2L) service, and the headteacher of Catcote Special School has recently been appointed as its 'executive' headteacher. A partnership between A2L and Catcote has strengthened leadership and management capacity at the unit and work is in progress to raise standards and to improve teaching and learning. At the same time, the rate of re-integration of permanently excluded pupils into mainstream settings has improved and the numbers of pupils who are permanently excluded has fallen sharply. Staff from Catcote School are supporting colleagues in all mainstream secondary schools. As a result, the authority is creating effective all-round provision.

This involves specific provision for excluded pupils at A2L as well as an outreach facility to support pupils in other schools who are at risk of exclusion.

Children and young people enjoy school. Attendance is rising, behaviour is good and exclusions are falling. Inspection findings reveal a positive picture with substantially good or better grades being awarded for all aspects and with the authority as a whole performing better than comparator authorities. Support for schools is good resulting in a low proportion of schools causing concern. Two schools were removed from Ofsted categories but the pupil referral unit became subject to a category. Out-of-school hours learning opportunities are offered by all schools; this is better than statistical neighbours and the national average. The council is sensitive to the needs of vulnerable pupils and is clearly focused upon improving their educational achievement. Support for children and young people who are looked after or have learning difficulties and/or disabilities is good and inspection evidence notes that progress made by learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is predominantly good or better. This compares favourably with statistical neighbours.

Areas for development

- Improve the performance of secondary school pupils particularly at Key Stage 3 and in gaining five or more GCSEs at Grades A* to C, including English and mathematics.
- Improve the performance of boys especially in relation to literacy.

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 aspect is good. No recommendations emerged from the joint area review.

The council has very good levels of children's participation and consultation and there is a wide range of mentoring systems and support programmes in schools. Children and young people are able to contribute towards scrutiny forums and are helping to shape some council services. There are good opportunities for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to make a positive contribution. There is good support for children and young people to be involved in reviews of their statements of special educational needs. Judgements at school inspections as to the extent to which learners make a positive contribution overall are good. The percentage of young people reached by publicly funded youth services has fallen but remains above comparator and national averages.

Effective corporate parenting is a strong feature of Hartlepool council, as is its demonstrable commitment to ensuring that looked after children and young people take part in reviews about what should happen next to them. In this latter respect, its performance is better than the national average, although slightly below

comparator councils. Looked after children and young people are supported to contribute to a wider scrutiny of how well children's services work. To help them find their voice, children and young people have access to a good independent advocacy service. All care leavers have an allocated personal adviser and a pathway plan in place.

The youth offending service makes good use of local and regional partnerships and is an integral part of provision in the Tees Valley. It provides a good range of activities for young people who are at risk of offending, and reparation projects for those who do offend. Work with families and individual young people is particularly effective, helping to reduce offending behaviour and raise self-esteem. Youth Justice Board prevention funding has enabled the establishment of youth inclusion projects in two areas of the town and Children's Services have enabled a number of linked projects to work together upon community regeneration initiatives. These are the Hartlepool intervention programme, the family intervention project and the youth inclusion projects. These provide multi-agency resources to address the needs of families receiving support from the council. Levels of youth offending and youth re-offending saw an increase in the cohort from 2001-02. However, between 2002 and 2003 the cohort figures for both indicators dropped and are in line with comparators. The number of first-time entrants to the youth justice system has increased by 20% and at a higher rate than comparators. The council reports that this increase is partially due to changes in neighbourhood policing with police officers having less discretion about action taken.

Area for development

- Reduce the number of first-time entrants to the youth justice system.

Achieving economic well-being

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 aspect is good. One recommendation emerged from the joint area review.

For action in the longer term

- Develop a wider range of courses for post-16 young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Although some of the work is at an early stage, much has already been done to improve provision for young people aged 16 and over who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The council has consulted parents about possible developments and acquired additional funding from a number of organisations to support a range of appropriate projects and initiatives, such as the 'Hot Project' and 'Connect to Work'. The transitional support strategy has been strengthened to ensure that all young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are supported through the

transition from Key Stage 4 to their next stage, and that essential information is shared with their new providers. Much of this new provision is centred on Catcote Special School. To meet the needs of these young people a range of vocational courses is being developed at the school and there is a strong emphasis upon work-related learning opportunities. Young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are also supported in their education and training by the Connexions Service and this helps to ensure that their entitlement to personal welfare and benefit support is also met.

Actions taken to prepare young people for working life are good; inspection evidence, for example, reveals that schools are principally good or better on 'the extent to which they enable young people to achieve economic well-being'. This is much higher than statistical neighbours. More young people are continuing in education and training beyond the age of 16; in 2006/07, for example, 86.4% of young people completing Year 11 continued in learning as opposed to 85.8% in the previous year. The percentage of young people achieving both Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications by the age of 19 is also improving and is above statistical neighbours. Achievement levels are rising, the gap with national averages is closing and the average point scores of students entered for GCE/VCE/A/AS is above both statistical neighbours and the national average. Although the underlying trends in relation to participation, progression and retention are improving, the proportion of young people who are not in education, employment or training has risen and is above the national average. The percentage of young people aged 16–18 who are not in education, employment or training, for example, rose from 10.0% in 2005/06 to 11.1% in 2006/07. However, the strategies which are being used to reduce this number are beginning to have an effect and current indications show that the percentage is starting to fall. Nevertheless, it remains an area of concern.

Considerable progress has been made in implementing the 14–19 strategy. The council has high aspirations for its young people and the aims of the strategy are well linked to local and regional needs. There is good collaboration between stakeholders, and early indications are that the strategy board and sub-groups comprise an effective structure. There is a clear commitment to partnership work and this is a major strength of the 14–19 approach in this authority. There are good links between educational institutions and employers, and, as a result, young people are well informed of the options available to them. An online prospectus is available for young people and a system is now in place to track the extent to which the prospectus is being accessed by them. The council will be offering one of the diplomas in 2008 and is developing appropriate plans for the introduction of further diplomas in 2009 and beyond.

Area for development

- Reduce the numbers of young people who are not in education, employment or training.

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, as is its management of these services. Three recommendations emerged from the joint area review.

For action in the next six months

- When the Children and Young People's Plan is reviewed, a high-level assessment of the financial implications should be incorporated.
- Undertake benchmarking of costs on a systematic basis.
- Engage service users in the evaluation of services they receive on a systematic basis.

The council has responded promptly and directly to these recommendations and has taken appropriate action in respect of all of them. The financial implications of the Children and Young People's Plan are now embedded within the plan and associated documents. Systematic benchmarking has been introduced and a mechanism for regular monitoring and reporting through departmental systems has been adopted. A participation strategy and associated procedures for engaging service users in the evaluation of services are in place. The council is continuing with its current good practice of consulting with and involving children and young people in its work. At the same time it is developing strategies with the Children's Trust to strengthen the way in which children and young people can be further engaged in evaluating the services they receive. Although the Tellus2 survey produced a generally positive reply from children in Year 6, the absence of any responses from young people in Years 8 and 10 meant that the views of young people in Hartlepool as revealed by the survey were not as comprehensive as they might have been.

Overall, the management of children's services in Hartlepool is good. There is strong and effective corporate leadership, which is fully engaged in listening to stakeholders and in working positively with its partners at all levels. There is substantial involvement of the voluntary and community sectors. Partnership work is of an exceptional quality and a significant strength of the directorate, as is forward planning. The preparatory work in advance of wave five of Building Schools for the Future is thorough and well focused. The authority is aware of those issues which will impinge directly upon outcomes for children and young people and is actively addressing them. On the whole, schools feel that they are very well served by the authority, though there is some dissatisfaction with levels of support on personnel issues and in relation to information and communication technology. Action is being taken to address both these concerns.

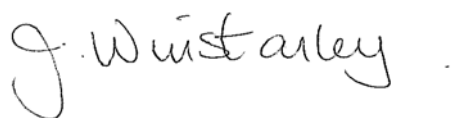
Higher levels of spending upon youth services and education budgets than comparator authorities and the national average serve to reinforce the picture of an authority which has an unambiguous commitment to improving the lives and life chances for children and young people. There has been a detailed review of the Children's and Young People's Plan and there is a clear emphasis upon developing the workforce to meet the priorities of this revision. This is an authority which has the focus, the determination and the capacity to achieve its high level of ambitions and aspirations for its young people.

A number of aspects of the council's support for children and young people needs to be further addressed. The conception rate amongst 15–17 year olds, for example, has risen but the council is targeting its resources appropriately to deal with this issue. The council has accessed additional funding streams to enable the needs of young people to be met and it has been innovative in its appointment of key staff within the directorate. Service delivery and resource management are strong. Performance management is well established. Continuing professional development for staff is a priority. Well-focused leadership and a dedicated staff, combine with the effective progress made since the joint area review to confirm the picture of an authority whose capacity for further improvement is good.

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

The children's service 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