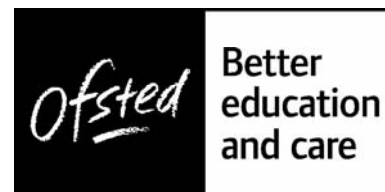


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Making Social Care
Better for People



Mr David Williams
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1 November 2006

Dear Mr Williams

2006 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN DURHAM 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 awarded¹
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	4

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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

Durham County Council delivers above minimum requirements for children and young people. There are some highly effective services which make a clear difference to young people. There has been close working with partners in district councils, health and the wider community to develop agreed objectives for the future across organisations. The Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP) was developed through a wide-ranging consultative process and includes a realistic assessment of needs. The weaker areas identified in last year's APA have been subject to targeted action which has led to improvement, in some cases developing them into strengths. Most social care services are outstanding and performance in education services is improving. The council is clear about its future priorities and staff are well trained. It has good capacity to improve its services.

Being healthy

The authority makes a good contribution towards improving the health of children and young people in the area. It faces considerable challenges due to its rural nature and levels of deprivation, and a number of measures of children's health are of concern. However, there is a very good level of joint working with health partners to ensure that what have traditionally been regarded as 'health' problems, such as low rates of breast feeding, childhood obesity, smoking and substance abuse, are now seen as the council's business too. The number of women initiating breast feeding has increased this year, and teenage pregnancy rates are gradually declining, but the impact of the council's activity upon some measures of children and young people's health cannot yet be demonstrated.

There are 14 Sure Start schemes which offer parenting programmes, including specific support for hard to reach groups such as travelling families. Most schools have achieved the healthy schools standard and a new school meals contract has been introduced so that meals are healthier. Smoking cessation services are available in a number of schools.

Looked after children have very good access to health assessments, and support for the health needs of those living in children's homes and foster placements is of a high standard. Specialist staff are available to support their emotional well-being.

An action plan implemented last year has resulted in a greater number of 16 to 18 year olds using Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). The timescales within which the CAMHS service undertakes the assessment of young people with mental health difficulties who offend, which was identified as an area of weakness last year, have improved.

Some service capacity needs to be improved, specifically services for children with very high care needs, and those needing therapy services.

Staying safe

The authority makes an excellent contribution towards the safety of children and young people. A local safeguarding children board has been established and there are well developed child protection arrangements across agencies which are backed up by professional training. The number of children on the Child Protection Register has reduced

from last year and is slightly lower than in similar councils, and all reviews are undertaken on time. Good planning ensures that once children have been removed from the register, a low number are re-registered. Judgements from school inspections show that in most schools there is good promotion of safe practices. Most schools have an anti-bullying policy, and the aim is for this to be in place for all schools by next year.

The number of looked after children has again reduced significantly, continuing a downward pattern which has seen a 20% fall from a high level three years ago. The number is now below that for similar councils. This has been achieved partly through investment in a range of preventative services, including family support and crisis response. Last year, the council's needs assessment identified a shortfall in service in one geographic area, so resources were redistributed and a new team was established to meet these needs. Partners are now planning additional support for the growing number of parents with particular difficulties such as substance misuse or mental health problems, so that the number of children needing the council's intervention will not increase in future years.

A high percentage of looked after children are in foster placements rather than residential care. A high number of adoption orders were granted this year, with most adoptive placements being achieved within 12 months of the decision that this was in the child's best interest. Care placements are stable in the short term, and the council intends to undertake further work to improve the level of longer term stability which is currently at an average level. All looked after children have a named qualified social worker, and almost all reviews of looked after children are undertaken on time.

An inspection of fostering services found that excellent support is provided for foster carers, especially for 'friends and families' who foster and for teenagers' placements. There is a treatment foster care scheme which provides individual placements for five teenagers who have challenging behaviour and who would otherwise be in residential care placements. An additional fifteen places are provided through a teenage placement scheme. A foster carers' payment for skills scheme has been introduced, linked to the achievement of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ).

A high number of looked after children are placed in County Durham by other councils, more than half as many as the council's own. Arrangements are in place to ensure that their whereabouts are known, and that information about them is coordinated between agencies.

Almost all children with disabilities aged over 14 have a transition plan to support their move from children's to adults' services. Direct payments are used by an increasing number of families of children with disabilities, now numbering the high figure of almost 100, and work has been undertaken to increase the availability of services that can be purchased by these families from independent providers

There are a very small number of children from minority ethnic backgrounds in Durham, but a relatively high number of children from traveller families. The 'ethnic minority and traveller achievement' service supports over 300 children. It offers support not only with

issues relating to language and education, but also aims to promote racial equality and to celebrate diversity, and links with the welfare rights service. The county is partnered with a similar county in Hungary to learn from their approach to diversity and to share good practice in working with traveller families. There are no children from minority ethnic backgrounds on the Child Protection Register, and a very small number are looked after. Future placement choice is to be improved through membership of a regional initiative which is recruiting and training carers from diverse backgrounds.

The number of social care initial assessments undertaken on time was identified as an area for improvement last year. The establishment of a county-wide initial assessment team eliminated this problem, and in 2005/06 the rate almost doubled to a very high level. The number of core assessments undertaken on time continues to be very good. There is an impressive system of file auditing by managers to ensure the consistency of work undertaken, and this has more than addressed last year's concerns about the uneven quality of some work.

Enjoying and achieving

The council's contribution in this outcome area is good. Improvement in many service areas is evident although it is too early to see the full impact. 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 children are well supported in meeting the early learning goals. Results at Key Stage 2 have improved from the previous year. Differences in writing outcomes between girls and boys reflect the national trend but scores remain below national averages. Boys' performance in English is an issue at Key Stage 3 together with the achievement of more-able pupils.

Results at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 have improved at the same rate as that seen nationally and overall performance is in line with that of similar authorities and national averages. This is the fourth year of improvement in results at Key Stage 4. The rate of improvement is twice that seen nationally and, although they are in line with statistical neighbours, results remain just below the national average. Intervention and support provided by the education service is good and is quickly raising achievement. The council recognises the need to challenge schools rigorously and identifies accurately the key areas for improvement. For example, it rightly acknowledges the number of looked after children with five GCSE A* to C is too low, although the number gaining one GCSE is good.

Attendance has improved as a result of the management strategies previously put in place. Targets have been met early, and the attendance of looked after children has also improved.

Seven schools out of fifty-nine inspected in this academic year have been placed in a formal category of concern by Ofsted. The education service responded quickly and has ensured that targeted support and intervention are now more sharply focused.

The authority has improved access to youth and community facilities, particularly those used by young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The number of youth service participants achieving accredited outcomes is slightly below national benchmarks.

Making a positive contribution

The council's contribution to outcomes in this outcome area is excellent. All partners demonstrate a commitment to involving young people in all aspects of their work, and there is a wide range of mechanisms in place to support participation. Young people developed an Every Child Matters audit tool which identified a number of priorities included in the CYPP, and they are involved in a range of council service developments and staff recruitment. Individual services have their own arrangements to encourage the participation of the young people with whom they are in contact, for example the youth service's county-wide group, and there is a participation officer in each district.

Many organisations working with young people, including schools and social care teams, have achieved membership status with 'Investing In Children', a multi-agency initiative which promotes children's engagement with policy makers. It also supports the participation of vulnerable children, and together with the children's rights officer, currently works on three of the five traveller sites in the county to build relationships with young people. There are young carers' groups across the county which offer support, information and social activities, as well as acting as a mechanism to enable young carers' voices to be heard.

More children and young people are now using independent advocacy services (96 this year, including a number of young people placed in County Durham by other councils), and the Natural Allies scheme supports the participation of a number of children with disabilities. There are local focus groups for young people of all backgrounds and abilities in the five Connexions areas, with special arrangements to ensure that the views of children with disabilities are represented and acted upon. A high number of looked after children contribute to their reviews, almost all of which are undertaken on time. The young runaways service is available 24 hours a day, and in the last year it has contacted 167 children who were notified as 'missing'.

All secondary schools have school councils, as do most primary schools. School inspections judged most schools to be good or outstanding on this outcome.

The most recent national data available (from 2004) indicates that a very low and reducing number of 13 to 19 year olds were reached by youth services, but the council explains that their recording systems were not adequate at that time. This was remedied, and their records for last year show that the number now reached is nearing the national target.

The reduction in the number of first time entrants to the youth justice system has exceeded the national target. Levels of recidivism were identified as an area of weakness last year, and the number of young people reoffending within 12 months has now reduced significantly. However, longer term recidivism continues to be a challenge. A fast track system has been introduced to ensure that those young people considered most at risk of

offending are linked with the appropriate services, and further strategies are being developed to tackle this issue. A higher number of looked after children received final warnings, reprimands and convictions this year and this is now at the same level as similar councils.

Achieving economic well-being

The council makes a good contribution to children and young people's economic well-being. In the last APA, outcomes were satisfactory and the development of the 14 to 19 curriculum was a key area for improvement. Substantial action has been taken which is now starting to make an impact.

Funding for 14 to 19 developments has been secured in addition to existing expenditure. This has led to the appointment of additional support staff. The work of local area advisory groups is effectively steering developments, including innovative vocational centres managed by secondary schools in partnership with further education (FE) colleges and training providers. A school centred initial teacher training initiative is providing specialist vocational teachers.

The quality of post-16 education is improving, and participation rates are significantly increasing. Standards attained by students in small sixth forms were identified as an area for improvement in the last APA. Appropriate action has been taken but there are still pockets of underachievement, for example in south west Durham.

There is an improving trend in the number of young people not in employment, education or training, which is well above the national and regional average. This is being addressed through projects such as *Beyond Expectations* and *Durham 1000* for the most vulnerable young people over 16 but there is still much to do. A high proportion of care leavers were in employment, education or training.

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

Partners in the county are working together to deliver good outcomes for children, each recognising their shared contribution to achieving success across all five outcomes. Local needs have been mapped, and the priorities in the CYPP have been developed together by a range of organisations with the effective participation of children, young people and their families. The council has a clear understanding of its strengths and weaknesses, and has reflected these in its local area agreement.

The Audit Commission has classified the council as being 'four stars' under its comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) framework, and its direction of travel as 'improving well'.

The responsibilities placed on the Director of Children's Services and the lead member are discharged effectively, and there is political leadership and support for the new agenda.

There is a well established, proactive corporate parenting panel, with broad membership and remit.

Expenditure on children's services remains slightly higher than in similar councils. This results partly from the emphasis on developing services which provide better outcomes for children by reducing the need for longer term and more expensive interventions. Examples of the success of the 'Invest to Save' approach are the reduction in the number of looked after children, the greater number of children placed nearer to home rather than in expensive placements outside the county, and the increased use of specialist foster placements rather than residential care.

Performance management and monitoring systems are good, and include the use of questionnaires and surveys for children and young people. There are quarterly benchmarking days to consider specific areas of practice, and quarterly performance management days when managers examine performance overall. There is an excellent system for auditing social care case files. In addition to communication through a staff newsletter, managers also undertake 'back to the floor' exercises, to observe and discuss practice.

Vacancies for staff and teacher posts are low, and appraisal processes are in place. There is a management development programme and the Children and Young People's Service is developing a workforce plan. There is a programme of training and development for all school staff, and staff who work with children in need are suitably skilled and qualified. Some residential care staff and social workers have yet to complete the relevant NVQ or post qualification training.

Integrated working and joint commissioning are areas to be further developed, and workforce planning across organisations does not yet reflect new ways of working.

Key strengths and areas for improvement

Key strengths	Key areas for improvement
<p><i>Being healthy:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the council's recognition of the importance of health outcomes introduction of healthy meals to schools looked after children's access to health assessment and services. 	<p><i>Being healthy:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> demonstrating impact of activity upon children's health.
<p><i>Staying safe:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> child protection arrangements fewer looked after children support for foster carers prompt completion of assessments. 	<p><i>Staying safe:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> long term stability of placements for looked after children.

<p><i>Enjoying and achieving:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consistent improvement in GCSE results • improvement in boys' achievement at Key Stage 2 • good quality early years provision. 	<p><i>Enjoying and achieving:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensuring schools do not fall into categories of concern • the number of looked after children gaining five A* to C • achievement in English at Key Stage 3 of boys and the more able • achievement and standards at Key Stage 4.
<p><i>Making a positive contribution:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • level of consultation for strategic development • support to engage 'hard to reach' children • participation of looked after children. 	<p><i>Making a positive contribution:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • long term recidivism.
<p><i>Achieving economic well-being:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 14 to 19 curriculum planning and coherence well developed • innovative 14 to 19 projects • very effective partnership work. 	<p><i>Achieving economic well-being:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • number of 16 to 19 year olds engaged in employment, education or training • standards attained in small sixth forms.
<p><i>Management of children's services</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • shared commitment and priorities across agencies • investment in preventative work • quality audits in social care. 	<p><i>Management of children's services</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • integrated working and joint commissioning.

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

- The impact of the council's actions to raise educational achievement and standards for all young people.
- How well the outcomes for young people aged 14 to 19 are improved by the action of services.

We confirm that the children's services grade will provide the score for the children and young people service block in the CPA 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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Commission for Social Care Inspection