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Mr Murray Rose
Director of Children's Services
Darlington Borough Council
Town Hall
Feethams
Darlington
DL1 5QT

Dear Mr Rose

Annual performance assessment of services for children and young people in Darlington Borough 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	4
Staying safe	3
Enjoying and achieving	2
Making a positive contribution	3
Achieving economic well-being	3
Capacity to improve, including the management of services for children and young people	3

*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

Darlington Borough Council makes a good contribution to improving outcomes for children and young people. It consistently delivers services that are above minimum requirements and has established a record of strong performance. The contribution it makes to improving outcomes for children and young people is outstanding in being healthy. It has had a very strong impact, for example, on the reduction in teenage conceptions and in improving the health of looked after children. The council has made a good contribution in three further areas: arrangements to help young people to stay safe, to make a positive contribution and to achieve economic well-being. For example, the recent JAR reported the work of the Local Safeguarding Children Board made a strong impact on safeguarding arrangements for young people and their families. The council involves a high proportion of looked after children in their statutory reviews. Good work with partners has led to a large number of young people gaining suitable qualifications as they prepare for adult life. The council’s contribution to young people’s ability to enjoy and achieve is adequate. It has overseen a number of successes in improving educational outcomes, but still has some way to go in this aspect, particularly in secondary schools.

The council’s evaluation of its strengths and areas for development is very well informed by an extensive range of data and is mostly accurate. It acts swiftly and decisively to make improvements where they are needed. The council manages its services well and has good capacity to improve.

Being healthy

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 being healthy is consistent with the evidence.

Major strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The number of mothers who breast-feed has increased considerably. ▪ The number of teenage conceptions has been reduced at a significantly faster rate than in similar councils and the national average. ▪ Child and adolescent mental health services are easily accessible. They offer a very good range of support and this is well targeted where it is needed most. ▪ A high proportion of looked after children have their health needs assessed, which is leading to a significant improvement in their health.
Important weaknesses and areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Schools are making slow progress in achieving Healthy School status.

Staying safe

Grade 3

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. The council's self evaluation of its strengths is accurate but insufficient weight has been given to important weaknesses such as the high rate of referrals and repeat referrals.

<p>Major strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The recent JAR judged safeguarding arrangements and services for looked after children to be good. ▪ The Local Safeguarding Children Board is delivering a broad safeguarding agenda. It runs very good training programmes which are bringing about improved outcomes for children and young people and their families. ▪ The implementation of the common assessment framework has led to early intervention and support, which have had a strong impact on children and families. ▪ The child protection assessment, planning and review procedures and practice are highly effective. The services to reduce risk and to support children and families are having a clear impact. ▪ The proportion of looked after children who are adopted is well above that found in similar councils and the national average.
<p>Important weaknesses and areas for development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Although the level of care for children and young people living in council children's homes is generally good, two homes do not meet all of the National Minimum Standards. ▪ The number of social care referrals and repeat referrals has increased significantly. The number of referrals that led to an initial assessment has decreased; it is well below the national average and the figures for similar councils.

Enjoying and achieving

Grade 2

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate. The council's self evaluation rightly recognises the good progress it has made in helping schools to reduce exclusions and to improve attendance. It points to some creditable successes in the achievement of vulnerable groups. However, it underestimates the significance of overall achievement and standards in schools, which are at or below national and local averages in some key stages.

<p>Major strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Pre-school education is good. Children in a high number of Early Years Foundation Stage settings receive a good education.
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- A high number of schools provide a good or outstanding education.
- Standards at the end of Key Stage 2 are above the national average and in line with standards in similar councils.
- The council's support for schools is increasingly effective, and a large and growing number of schools value it highly. Schools in an Ofsted category of concern are making at least satisfactory progress, and have been reduced in number. Targeted interventions have helped ensure that all secondary schools have met the government's floor target for GCSE results.
- Looked after children perform well at school. Their attendance is better than average and they achieve well. The council attributes this success to its close monitoring of their progress. Children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities also make good progress.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- Standards in Key Stage 1 have been declining since 2005 and are below those found nationally and in similar councils.
- Although standards in secondary schools are in line with the national average and with standards in similar councils, children do not make enough progress in Key Stages 3 or 4, given their level of attainment when they start secondary school.
- Despite a significant fall in exclusions and absence rates, there is still room for further improvement. Attendance remains below the average in similar councils. Fixed term exclusions remain high and the number of permanent exclusions in secondary schools is well above the national average.

Making a positive contribution

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 making a positive contribution is consistent with the evidence.

Major strengths

- The number of first-time entrants into the criminal justice system has fallen considerably since last year and is much lower than in similar areas.
- Final warnings and convictions for looked after children are lower than in similar areas and the national average.
- A high proportion of looked after children and young people participate in their statutory reviews.
- Services and resources are used flexibly, and closely meet the needs of children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and their families.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Re-offending rates are higher than in similar areas and above the national average. ▪ Opportunities are limited for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to influence the shape of local services. |
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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.

Major strengths

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A high number of young people achieve a Level 2 or Level 3 qualification by the time they are aged 19. The proportion with a Level 2 qualification is close to regional and national averages and the proportion with a Level 3 qualification is above that found in similar councils. A-level results are above average. ▪ Partnership work between secondary schools and the two colleges is productive. For example, an alternative curriculum for disaffected 14- to 19-year-olds has led to very good retention and attendance rates and high aspirations in that group. ▪ The council makes good provision for some vulnerable groups, including teenage parents and young people leaving the care of the council. A high number of looked after children are engaged in employment, education or training. |
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Important weaknesses and areas for development

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A high proportion of some groups of young people is not engaged in employment, education or training post-16. These include young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, young offenders, and 17- to 18-year-olds. ▪ The proportion of 16- to 18-year-olds whose current activity is not known is high and increasing. |
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Capacity to improve, including the management of children's services

Grade 3

The council's capacity to improve its services for children and young people is good. Its management of these services is also good. The Children and Young People's Plan sets out a clear and ambitious vision. It is based on a detailed analysis of need, has been updated in the light of recent developments, and is understood well by partners and staff. The new management team in children's services provides strong leadership to the council department and to the Children's Trust. Officers have responded promptly to concerns identified by their own analysis, as well as to those raised by Ofsted in APAs and in school inspection reports. Areas of previously weak

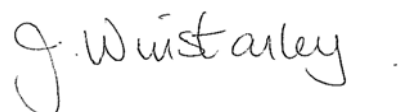
performance such as school attendance and exclusion rates have improved. The council has enjoyed some notable successes in the outcomes for vulnerable groups. It has, for example, reduced the gap in achievement between the least well off and the rest. Driven by strong leadership, highly committed to working closely with its partners, and supported by well conceived organisational changes and good financial and performance management, the children's services department has good capacity to make further improvements.

Major strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ The JAR judged capacity to improve to be good.▪ The council is ambitious and sets challenging targets for improvement.▪ The highly effective use of an extensive range of data leads to good awareness of where support is needed, accurate targeting of resources, good monitoring of progress, and improved outcomes, particularly for vulnerable groups.▪ The council has made good progress bringing together different partners to improve outcomes for its children and young people.
Important weaknesses and areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ The council has made limited progress with its arrangements for joint workforce planning and joint commissioning to bring about closer integration of different services.

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