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Mr Murray Rose
Director of Children's Services
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Children's Services
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Dear Mr Rose

Annual children's services assessment

Ofsted guidance published in April 2011 explains that the annual assessment of children's services is derived from the performance profile of the quality of services for children and young people in each local area. This performance profile includes findings from across Ofsted's inspection and regulation of services and settings for which the local authority has strategic or operational responsibilities, either alone or in partnership with others, together with other published data.

In reaching the assessment of children's services, Ofsted has taken account of inspection outcomes including the arrangements for making sure children are safe and stay safe and performance against similar authorities and/or national measures. More weight has been given to the outcomes of Ofsted's inspections and regulatory visits (Blocks A and B in the performance profile).

The annual assessment derives from a four point scale:

4	Performs excellently	An organisation that significantly exceeds minimum requirements
3	Performs well	An organisation that exceeds minimum requirements
2	Performs adequately	An organisation that meets only minimum requirements
1	Performs poorly	An organisation that does not meet minimum requirements

Within each level there will be differing standards of provision. For example, an assessment of 'performs excellently' does not mean all aspects of provision are perfect. Similarly, an assessment of 'performs poorly' does not mean there are no adequate or even good aspects. As in 2010, while the performance profile remains central to Ofsted's assessment, meeting or not meeting the minimum requirements alone does not define the grade. The assessment has involved the application of inspector judgement.

Darlington Borough Council children's services assessment 2011

Children's services assessment	Performs well (3)
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Children's services in Darlington Borough Council perform well. This year's higher grade recognises the improvements made in the quality of some provision, importantly the improved local authority adoption agency and the increased proportion of good and outstanding children's homes. Areas of strengths and those identified for improvement remain largely the same as last year. The large majority of provision helps children and young people stay safe and enjoy their learning.

Ofsted's most recent inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements for children in need and children who may be in need of protection took place in October 2010 when two strengths and many satisfactory aspects of practice were found. There were no priority actions requiring urgent attention.

Strengths

- For children under five, the very good performance of nursery and primary schools has been maintained. Levels of development in the Early Years Foundation Stage, including for children from low-income families, are rising year on year and match similar areas.
- The very large majority of primary schools are good or outstanding, as in 2010. The primary school previously in an Ofsted category of concern has made good progress and is now satisfactory. Results at the age of 11 match similar areas and have been above the national average for the past two years although provisional results for 2011 show a slight dip. Progression in English is particularly strong.
- Strengths in most post-16 provision have been sustained and young people have access to outstanding provision for learning in two colleges and one school sixth form. The other school sixth form, satisfactory at its last inspection, was part of a pupil referral unit that closed in July 2011. Results at the age of 19 have improved over the past four years and match similar areas although young people from a low-income background do less well than their counterparts in similar areas.
- The local authority special school and its sixth form are outstanding as they were last year. The independent special schools are also good or better.
- Provision for looked after children has improved. One of the four local authority children's homes is outstanding, one is good and the other two are satisfactory. The quality of the privately-run children's homes used by the local authority has also improved and almost all are now good. The local authority adoption agency has improved from satisfactory to good. The local authority fostering agency is good as reported last year.

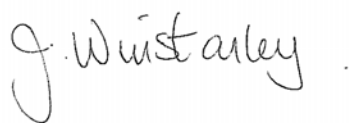
- For 16-year-olds, including for young people from a low-income background, results at Key Stage 4 including English and mathematics have improved over the past four years and match similar areas. In 2011, provisional results show this overall improvement has been sustained.

Areas for further improvement

- The proportion of good childminding provision has not improved significantly and this was an area for development in 2010.
- Overall, the quality of secondary school provision is mixed. As elsewhere, significant changes are taking place in Darlington. There are currently three local authority schools; one is outstanding and the other two are satisfactory. Three schools became academies over the past year. They have not yet been inspected as academies, but were at least good when previously inspected as local authority schools. The only inspected academy is satisfactory. The satisfactory pupil referral unit is now closed and the other unit, although making satisfactory progress, is inadequate.
- The most recent inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements for children in need and children who may be in need of protection noted that prompt action was taken to address some of the areas for development identified in the February 2010 inspection. However, it also reported that some issues had not been addressed fully, such as screening the referrals from the police and assessing the risks to children in cases of domestic abuse.

This children's services assessment is provided in accordance with section 138 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Juliet Winstanley". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager, Children's Services Assessment