

9 December 2010

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

Dear Mr Rose

Annual children's services assessment

Ofsted guidance published in July 2010 explains that the annual assessment of children's services is derived from the performance profile of the quality of services and outcomes 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 data from the relevant indicators in the National Indicator Set (NIS).

In reaching the assessment of children's services, Ofsted has taken account of all inspected and regulated services for children and young people, arrangements for making sure children are safe and stay safe and performance against 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 2009, 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 2010

Children's services assessment	Performs adequately (2)
---------------------------------------	--------------------------------

Children's services in Darlington Borough Council perform adequately.

In 2009, a transitional year, Darlington was assessed as performing well. However, in 2010 there is not enough good or better provision to meet the minimum requirements for that grade.

Inspections show that much of the early years and childcare provision is adequate. None of the four local authority children's homes is good and one is inadequate. One of the two pupil referral units is inadequate. The other one is only satisfactory. Although no secondary school is inadequate, three out of seven are only satisfactory. There is a high proportion of good or better nursery and primary schools. The general further education and tertiary college, the sixth form college and the school sixth form are all outstanding. The special school, including its sixth form provision, is outstanding. The local fostering agency is good and the adoption agency is adequate.

The recent unannounced inspection of front-line child protection services found areas of strength and no areas for priority action.

National performance measures show that the very large majority of outcomes are in line with or above the averages for England or for similar areas. Health outcomes are always at least as good as in similar areas and the number of young women aged under 18 who become pregnant is reducing. Results in national tests at the age of 11 are above those of similar areas. GCSE results show steady improvement and match those in similar local authorities. Young people from low-income families do as well as in similar areas at all ages. The number of young people not in work, education or training has been reduced.

Key areas for further development

- Improve the children's homes and the pupil referral units so that all are at least good.
- Improve secondary schools so that more are good or better.
- Improve early years and childcare settings so that more are good.

Outcomes for children and young people

Local arrangements to encourage children and young people to live healthy lives are mostly successful. Improvements include better services for children and young people with emotional or mental health difficulties, and a reduction in the number of young women under the age of 18 who become pregnant. The actions taken by the

local authority and its partners to reduce the number of young people taking drugs or drinking too much have had a positive impact, and performance is better than in similar areas. The review of the 2008-2011 Children and Young People's Plan indicates that the local authority has a range of strategies in place to encourage children to be active and healthy at an early age, for example in the children's centres. Nearly all schools, the special schools and the colleges are good at promoting healthy lifestyles. Some children's homes do not do as well. For example, in one home, young people's health needs are either not recorded or are too vague.

Arrangements for keeping children and young people safe are almost always good. Inspections show that schools and colleges are effective at ensuring pupils' safety. Prompt action was taken by the Local Safeguarding Children's Board to investigate a weakness in one home. Ofsted confirmed that it was satisfied with the review and no further action was necessary. The inspection of front-line child protection services found that there is prompt response to safeguard children and young people where there are immediate child protection concerns and partnership working arrangements, for example with relevant health staff, are strong. The local authority acknowledges that, when the number of referrals increases, social workers have high caseloads. However, plans are in place to strengthen the resources of the duty team when this is the case. The issue of bullying is taken seriously, particularly for the most vulnerable children. The local authority reports that the children in care council, "*Darlo Care Crew*", has not raised bullying as a major problem and young people in one children's home are developing a project to raise awareness further.

Nurseries, primary schools and colleges are good at helping children and young people to do well and enjoy their learning. The special school is outstanding. Results in the national tests for 11-year-olds have fluctuated over the past three years. In 2009 they were much improved and were above similar areas. Results improved further in 2010. Some secondary schools are not always helping all children to reach high enough standards. Despite improvement in some aspects, the latest monitoring visit to one pupil referral unit shows that much remains to be done to increase the rate of progress of the young people in the unit. The local authority reports that young people with special educational needs make good progress from their starting points. However, more need to achieve GCSEs at the higher A* to C grades. Standards overall have risen in secondary schools and, by the age of 16, half of young people gain five or more good GCSEs. This matches results in similar areas. Provisional GCSE results for 2010 show further improvement. The results in GCSE science, below average in 2009, have also improved. The local authority is mostly successful in its work to help weaker schools. The inadequate primary school is making satisfactory progress and considerable resources have been allocated to the school to support improvement.

Successful arrangements for involving children and young people in positive activities mean that performance has improved and Darlington is doing at least as well as similar areas. Fewer young people than in similar areas say that they have been drunk or taken drugs. Fewer young people break the law and action has been taken to ensure that most young offenders are provided with education, training or work. Funding has been provided to improve facilities, such as the Skerne Park Community

Centre, and to tackle anti-social behaviour. Almost all schools and other settings are good at involving young people in decision-making and activities in their communities. Permanent exclusions from secondary schools are reducing.

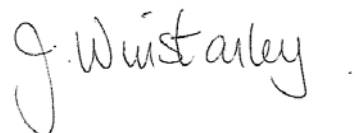
Young people in Darlington are doing at least as well as similar areas by the age of 19. More 16- to 18-year-olds are in education, training or work and more gain good qualifications. Inspections show that post-16 provision is consistently outstanding. The local authority recognises that further opportunities for training are required and young people say that they want better access to apprenticeships. Overall, outcomes for young people from low-income families have improved. In the best children's homes staff encourage young people to achieve and support them effectively to move into adulthood. The data for 2008/09 show that the proportion of care leavers in education, work or training was low. The most recent unvalidated data for 2010 indicate that more care leavers are currently in work, education or training.

Prospects for improvement

National performance measures show that outcomes for children and young people are improving in Darlington. However, not enough inspection judgements for early years settings, secondary schools, pupil referral units and children's homes are good or better. The local authority's review of its Children and Young People's Plan includes relevant priorities to improve further the outcomes for all children and young people, particularly those living in poverty. However, renewed focus is required to improve inadequate and satisfactory provision to good. The *What's Changed? Logs* in 2008-2009 have enabled Darlington to use young people's views to plan future developments to key services. Ofsted's monitoring visits to weaker schools show that the local authority is doing good work to help them get better. The inspection of the youth offending service in January 2010 reported that there were positive prospects for the future.

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 style with a large initial 'J'.

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager, Children's Services Assessment