

26 November 2007

Mr M Rose
Director of Children's Services
Darlington Borough Council
Town Hall
Feethams
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Dear Mr Rose

2007 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN DARLINGTON BOROUGH COUNCIL

This letter summarises the findings of the 2007 annual performance assessment (APA) for your local authority. The judgements in the letter draw on your review of the children and young people's plan and the evidence and briefings provided by Ofsted, other inspectorates and relevant bodies. 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

Darlington Borough Council delivers services for children and young people at a good level. It knows its strengths and weaknesses well and plans appropriate action to tackle any shortcomings it has identified. Its contribution to improving outcomes is outstanding in two of the five areas, and good in another two. However, its contribution in relation to the enjoyment and achievement of young people remains only adequate. The recent appointments of a new director of children's services and of other senior managers together with a radical restructuring of the department have led to some encouraging signs of improvement, but it is too early to judge the impact of these changes.

Being healthy

Grade 4

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is outstanding. The previous APA identified no areas for improvement.

The local authority's knowledge, understanding and delivery of services through highly effective partnership arrangements are leading to improved outcomes for children and young people; in particular, they are narrowing the gap for vulnerable

groups. For example, commissioning arrangements have been strengthened with the creation of a joint management post between the local authority and the Primary Care Trust (PCT) to deliver a wide range of multi-agency services for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

There is a robust approach to monitoring, review and continual improvement of service delivery, and the service is very good at learning from the views of young people to maintain high standards. The PCT health coordinator for looked after children ensures the number of looked after children and care leavers who had their teeth looked at by a dentist and had an annual health assessment during the previous 12 months is very good at 93%; this is better than the rate in similar areas and the national average.

All schools are seeking to achieve Healthy Schools Status and the authority has accelerated its plans for this programme to ensure targets are met. Five schools have achieved the award and the authority is confident it will increase this number to 15 by December 2007 and reach its stretch target of 30 schools by December 2009. Initiatives to promote healthy lifestyles are comprehensive and having an impact. For example, access to National Health dental care services is very good and improvements have been made on the number of decayed, missing and filled teeth for children aged 5–14, which is now at an acceptable level.

Early years performance with regard to health is strong and results in very good outcomes for young children. The proportion of early years settings receiving a good grade for this aspect is significantly better than in similar areas. There is good access to healthy foods for children attending children's day care activities. The number of teenage conceptions is in line with similar areas. The authority has targeted hotspot secondary schools and has placed a strong emphasis on early intervention. For example, it is introducing a programme in primary schools and a range of other initiatives with partnership agencies to give advice, information and guidance to young people. Its work has resulted in an excellent reduction from the baseline year; the rate of improvement is consistently better than similar areas and significantly better than found nationally.

Performance in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) is very good. Targets for improving services have been met: expenditure has increased by 22%, above the national rate of 16%; progress towards a comprehensive CAMHS 24/7 service for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is good; and arrangements for meeting the needs of children and young people with urgent mental health needs have progressed very well. Protocols for partnership working between agencies to support young people with complex or persistent mental health needs are good. Tier 2 services are a strong feature. Links between CAMHS, the achievement of Healthy Schools Status and the social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL) initiative have been offered to all 30 primary schools and taken up by 28. Emotional health and well-being referral pathways have been developed and distributed to all schools. Access to CAMHS by 16 and 17 year olds, appropriate to their age and level of maturity, has progressed and is now considered to be very good. Waiting times for new cases under four weeks and under 26 weeks have

improved and are now better than the England average. Action to meet Youth Offending Service (YOS) referrals for acute and non acute cases and substance misuse assessment and interventions is excellent.

Area(s) for development

- Accelerate plans to reduce further the number of decayed, missing and filled teeth in children aged 5 to 14.

Staying safe

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good.

The previous APA identified one area for improvement: the need to improve further the long term stability of looked after children. Priorities set out in the children and young people's plan recognise the need to improve the stability of their placements and in the past 12 months the council has made some important improvements leading to satisfactory progress. Its efforts are focused on permanency planning and reducing the number of young people aged 13 or older coming into the system. The number of children who are adopted is now very good; special guardianship orders are used well; the number of looked after children in residential accommodation is consistently better than in similar areas; and performance on completing statutory reviews is very good. Family support initiatives are highly effective and have led to a reduction in the number of children looked after by the council, and the short-term stability of placements is very good. However, initiatives have not had an impact on performance in terms of the number of children living in the same placement for at least two years. The council acknowledges this and is confident it can improve outcomes for looked after children and young people in this respect.

Overall, services are very good at narrowing the gap for vulnerable and hard-to-reach groups. For example, an inspection of the fostering service identified excellent outcomes for people who use the service and recognised the very good action to reach Traveller young people by the Youth Service at the Honey Pot Lane Traveller Site.

The authority supports the registration and quality of early years care providers very well; the proportion judged by inspectors to be good is higher than the national average. Schools' performance in this aspect is a strong feature; inspections find that pupils have a very good knowledge and awareness of safe practice and that there is some outstanding practice in primary and nursery settings, an assessment which is supported by the findings of the school survey.

The council has improved street lighting, cycle paths and street management, and this has resulted in a good rate of reduction since 1998 in the number of children aged 0 to 15 who were killed or seriously injured in road traffic accidents, although

recently their number has increased slightly, contrary to the national trend. The council, through its schools, has strengthened anti-bullying measures; a particular strength is that young people across a number of schools are taking a lead in this work as part of the Social Norms project. The Tellus2 survey confirmed the council is right to prioritise this area of work. The YOS is targeting bullying experienced by vulnerable groups effectively as part of a borough-wide strategy to combat discrimination. The number of racist incidents recorded by schools this year has been reduced.

Procedures for safeguarding children and young people are managed effectively by the local safeguarding board. The implementation of the common assessment framework is satisfactory with good examples of agencies completing assessments. There is a good awareness of thresholds across agencies and the authority is confident its targets will be met. The percentage of referrals of children in need that led to initial assessment, and the numbers of child protection repeat referrals, are low and stable, demonstrating that early intervention and support for children and families are highly effective. The use of interventions to reduce child protection referrals is better than in similar areas; the number of core assessments completed in 35 working days is very good at 87%; and the completion of case reviews is very good at 100%. The numbers of discontinued child protection plans and of children who are de-registered are consistently better than similar authorities and the national average. No children have been on a plan or registered for more than two years. However, performance in some respects has deteriorated. For example, the percentage of section 47 enquiries, which led to an initial child protection conference within 15 working days, and the percentage of initial assessments carried out within seven working days of referral are worse than in similar areas and the national average. The authority acknowledges this and has taken corrective action.

Area(s) for development

- Closely monitor child protection activity to bring about improvement in deficit areas.
- Closely monitor progress on looked after children and young people's long-term stability to ensure improvement.

Enjoying and achieving

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate. Although the authority has made progress on a number of fronts since the last APA, and unvalidated data for 2007 give grounds for optimism, there is still room for improvement with regard to pupils' achievement, attendance and exclusions.

Inspections of the provision for early years show that it is good in more settings than in similar authorities. The council's information is that there are sufficient places for all children but take-up is low in some parts of town. The skills shown by pupils at the end of the Foundation Stage are higher than is typical for this age group. By the end of Key Stage 1, however, attainment is slightly below average; since 2002, standards in reading and writing have gradually declined. At Key Stage 2, standards have been rising faster than the national trend and in 2006 were above average. Given the starting points of these pupils this represents satisfactory progress.

Results at Key Stage 3 in 2006 remained below the national average and those of similar authorities, particularly in English. The gap between boys' and girls' performance was wider than found nationally. These results prompted the new director to commission an investigation into the reasons for the apparent fall in performance after Key Stage 2 in some parts of the borough. At Key Stage 4 the proportion of pupils achieving five A* to C grades is regularly close to the national average and that of similar authorities. However, the number achieving at least one A* to G grade fell between 2002 and 2006 to below the national average and that of similar authorities. Given pupils' level of attainment when they began secondary school, this represents slow progress. The variation between schools is considerable. For example, whereas pupils' progress in one school was extremely good, in another it was poor. The need to improve pupils' progress in both key stages was highlighted in the last two APAs and still applies. However, early indications from unvalidated data in 2007 suggest that improvements have taken place on all these fronts: English results at Key Stage 3 have risen; the number of pupils with one A* to G grade is closer to the average; and the variation between schools at Key Stage 4 has been reduced. The authority attributes this improvement in some measure to the support it has given schools in tracking pupils' progress so teachers can provide more challenge and better support for individuals.

Absence and exclusion rates in primary and secondary schools have been high for several years and remain stubborn problems for the authority. The need for improvement was stressed in the last two APAs. Attendance has been judged inadequate in a fifth of the schools inspected by Ofsted since 2005. The authority has taken a number of measures to help schools improve attendance, such as truancy sweeps and early penalty notices, and data provided by the authority about the first two terms in 2006/07 indicate considerable improvement. A more relevant curriculum for a small number of difficult pupils in Key Stage 4 has had a powerful effect on their attendance. The number of exclusions has increased significantly in both phases since 2004. The education psychology, behaviour support and school counselling services have worked with staff and pupils to improve behaviour, and schools have agreed a protocol for supporting pupils at risk of exclusion from other schools. However, early indications from unvalidated data for 2006/07 indicate that the number of permanent exclusions from secondary schools has not been reduced.

Ofsted's inspections of the borough's schools indicate that the quality of education is mostly good, particularly in primary schools. This compares favourably with similar authorities. Up to the end of 2006/07 it was, however, inadequate in two schools and in the pupil referral unit, and outstanding in none. The authority provides effective support for its three schools in one of Ofsted's categories of concern. Two have made satisfactory progress and one has made good progress over the last year. Indeed, one school was removed from its category very recently.

The achievement of vulnerable children and young people continues to be at least satisfactory. Although their numbers are small, young people in care continue to do well in GCSE examinations. Two significant minority ethnic groups, Traveller and Bangladeshi children, achieve below average when compared to all children nationally, but according to the authority's data are achieving at least as well as, and in some cases better than, Traveller and Bangladeshi children perform nationally. The council's monitoring and support for pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are strengths. A high proportion of new statements of special need are processed quickly. Inspections indicate that these pupils make generally good progress in most schools.

The new management team in the children's services department has swiftly tackled some outstanding issues and, in particular, has worked hard to improve its relationship with schools. An encouraging sign of its success is the school survey, which has elicited a significantly higher and more positive response than the previous survey. There is still some way to go. The responses are still less positive than they are in most authorities with regard to several aspects, including the council's effectiveness in challenging schools and support for raising attainment.

Area(s) for development

- Raise standards in Key Stage 1 and in secondary schools.
- Reduce the absence and exclusion rates.
- Help more schools to provide an outstanding education.

Making a positive contribution

Grade 4

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes in this aspect is outstanding.

The previous APA identified one area for improvement: the need to provide independent support for birth parents and families of adopted children. The authority has improved support for these groups as part of its strategy to tackle the stability of placements for looked after children and young people. A new post-adoption worker is helping to coordinate this work and an effective independent support service has

been commissioned for birth parents and families. The inspection of the adoption service found it was providing good outcomes for children and young people.

The authority demonstrates a total commitment to empowering young people to have a greater voice and influence over local decision-making. This is delivered effectively through the children and young people's plan, including highly effective consultation with representative groups of children and young people and their families, particularly those from vulnerable and hard-to-reach groups. For example, young carers are involved in needs analysis and action planning. The council listens to contributions made by children and young people through a variety of formal mechanisms and this is helping to influence the shape of the service. For example, looked after children have been involved in the development and implementation of quality assurance arrangements in children's homes, and accessible sport and leisure facilities have been developed with the involvement of children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The number of looked after children and young people communicating their views at their statutory review is very good at 98% and considerably better than in similar areas. All children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have a transition plan, and systems to promote the voice of these children and their parents through the transition planning process are very good.

Children and young people experience high levels of involvement in decision-making in school; for example, all schools have a school council. This is supported by the Tellus2 survey with higher than national average numbers stating that their views are listened to. Information, advice and guidance have been improved; the Children's Information Service has achieved the matrix quality standard. The authority's role in supporting early years provision is better than in similar areas and this is reflected in the outcomes in early years settings: school inspections show outcomes are very good, with pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development judged good or better in most schools.

The Youth Service continues to make progress and consolidate the rapid improvement noted in last year's APA under a new head of service. It has a central role in delivering targeted responses to anti-social behaviour, for example through the use of detached youth work and by encouraging high levels of participation in available universal and targeted activities. Local data show the following: reach is at 33%, above the national target of 25%; participation is at 16%, above the national target of 15%; and recorded and accredited outcomes are in line with the national targets. Volunteering opportunities are promoted very well. High levels of young people are in volunteering programmes, such as Citizens in Action and Millennium Volunteers.

There is strong partnership work to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour through the multi-agency crime reduction partnership. The strong links between the YOS and the children's services department are leading to better responses; for example, there is improved knowledge about communities and cases, and more shared work in schools. The Darlington YOS is a very strong performer within the region and has shown the ability over time to focus on the main issues affecting performance. For

example, opportunities for young offenders in education, training and employment have improved to an acceptable level; the number of first-time offenders is improving and is now better than similar areas; the numbers who re-offend have fallen in a year from 60 to 54, representing very good performance on a small population; and the number of looked after children and young people offending has significantly improved over the last two years from a high position to slightly better than similar areas and the national average.

Achieving economic well-being

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. Provision in schools and colleges is good and improving, although there is still some way to go before the local 14–19 strategy is finalised and the curriculum offer is fully effective.

Most schools inspected by Ofsted are preparing pupils for their future economic well-being effectively. The quality of education in the town's sixth forms is at least good. In 2006, the proportion of 19 year olds achieving Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications was higher than in similar authorities. The percentage of pupils in the Tellus2 survey who are hoping to go to university is above average. More and more students are applying and being accepted for higher education courses. The increase in the number of young people completing an apprenticeship between 2004 and 2006 was above average and the number of 16–19 year olds not in education, employment or training was below average in 2005/06. However, work remains to be done to raise aspirations among some of the hard-to-reach groups. The proportion of 16 year olds who continue in learning is below that in similar authorities, for example. The number of 19 year olds joining the ranks of those not in education, training or employment rose in 2006/07. The activities of a relatively high number of 16–19 year olds are not known.

Local community and regeneration schemes take full account of the needs of young people and are targeted well on the most vulnerable groups. The authority has identified that children and young people from the most economically disadvantaged areas underachieve significantly and it is tackling the issue. Over 90% of young people leaving care are living in suitable accommodation and a high number of 19 year olds in care are in employment, education or training.

The authority has supported various schemes to improve the environment, such as the recruitment of young caretakers to make the area cleaner and safer. Almost three quarters of the young people who took part in the Tellus2 survey thought Darlington a good place to live, though higher than average numbers would welcome more parks and fewer people hanging around.

Opportunities for vocational working are promoted satisfactorily through collaboration with a wide range of partners. The borough's 14–19 trust has secured agreement to introduce three vocational diplomas in 2009, not in 2008 as originally intended. The authority has also supported the introduction of a more innovative and relevant curriculum for young people in Key Stage 4, which, along with an effective mentoring programme, has improved the attendance, achievement and progression to post-16 education of a small disaffected group of pupils. More remains to be done to make the Key Stage 4 curriculum relevant to the needs of all young people in all schools. Schools are reported to be committed to collaborating on a common 14–19 curriculum but in practice there is little movement of pupils between schools, partly because transport and timetabling issues have not been resolved and also because the quality assurance arrangements recommended in the 2006 APA have not been developed and implemented. The authority has invested in additional capacity to revise and implement its 14–19 strategy as progress over the last difficult year has stalled somewhat. It recognises the need to involve more employers in these developments. It also plans to improve the information, advice and guidance to young people, even though the service meets current national standards.

Area(s) for development

- Accelerate progress with all aspects of the 14–19 strategy.
- Agree and implement arrangements to assure the quality of education and workplace provision.

Capacity to improve, including the management of children's services

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The council has good capacity to improve its services for children and young people. Despite several changes in senior staff during the past year the management of these services remains at least as strong and results in outcomes that are mostly good or outstanding. The comprehensive review of the children and young people's plan showed that good progress is being made on many fronts.

Young people are a priority for the council, and the focus of its Local Area Agreement. The council continues to work productively with a range of partners for the benefit of its young people, especially through the local strategic partnership. Local services share objectives and plans for improving the well-being of children and young people in the area. A creative arts project, for example, involving a collaboration of children's services, the PCT and CAMHS gave 35 looked after children the opportunity to develop their skills in a range of creative arts including film-making.

The authority manages its performance well. Objectives are based on a robust audit of need which has involved parents and carers. It monitors its progress towards its objectives effectively, making very good use of performance data and the views of partners and clients. Its review of the children's and young people's plan, for example, drew on the views of a wide range of stakeholders including parents and young people, using mechanisms such as focus groups, the Voice and Action Group, and the Parents' Forum. It includes an honest appraisal of data related, for example, to areas such as attendance and behaviour, to identify strengths and weaknesses. It plans relevant new actions in the light of the progress it is making. The director, for example, added two priorities to the plan in order to emphasise his commitment to improving the achievement of the least wealthy and the most vulnerable children in the borough. The council is clearly committed to grappling with the main challenges it faces; its reports are honest about shortcomings, and the scrutiny committee regularly considers relevant issues such as examination results and exclusions. The lack of improvement in Key Stage 3 and in attendance prompted the establishment of two director's commissions. With few exceptions, its careful planning and regular monitoring result in good outcomes, particularly in children's care.

The authority's plans are ambitious. Several significant innovations have been introduced recently to improve the quality of education in the borough. The success of the federation arrangements at the Education Village has been followed by the formation of two further federations and an academy in September 2007. The authority has set fairly challenging targets for 2008 and even more ambitious targets for 2009. These include its main areas of concern such as standards, attendance and exclusions.

The budget is managed prudently. There are few surplus places and no school has more than 25%, despite falling rolls. Different services collaborate effectively to pool budgets; for example, CAMHS and the safeguarding board. Since 2003, eight schools have moved into new buildings and funding has been secured for six more, which means that over a third of the total, as well as the pupil referral unit, will soon have brand new premises. The Audit Commission judges that the authority gives good value for money.

The children's services department has been restructured recently, following some new appointments at senior level. It now has a renewed cohesion and drive to improve outcomes for young people. Although these changes are recent, there are already indications of improvement, particularly in schools' relationships with the authority. New protocols to support and challenge schools, which were an area for development in the last APA, have now been implemented. Senior officers are confident that schools have welcomed this development. In the school survey, responses from secondary schools suggest less confidence in the authority than those from primary schools. However, headteachers' views overall indicate a more positive view: they place the authority in the top quartile in several respects,

including the leadership of senior officers and schools' ability to influence policy and plans.

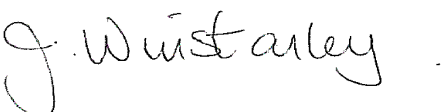
Early signs are encouraging and unvalidated data suggest that the authority is moving in the right direction, although it is too early to be able to confirm the effect of recent activity on outcomes for children and young people.

Area(s) for development

- Increase secondary schools' confidence in the authority's capacity to support them effectively.

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.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Juliet Winstanley".

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager
Local Services Inspection