

Margaret Asquith  
Director of Children's Services  
Darlington Borough Council  
Town Hall  
Feethams  
Darlington  
DL1 5QT

**05 October 2006**

Dear Mrs Asquith

**2006 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN DARLINGTON BOROUGH 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 awarded <sup>1</sup>
The contribution of <i>the local authority's children's services</i> in maintaining and improving outcomes for children and young people	<b>3</b>
The council's overall <i>capacity to improve</i> its services for children and young people	<b>3</b>
The contribution of <i>the local authority's social care services</i> in maintaining and improving outcomes for children and young people	<b>4</b>

Darlington Borough Council delivers good overall provision for children and young people. In aspects including being healthy, staying safe and making a positive contribution, it is outstanding. There is very good partnership working between agencies and with children,

1

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

young people and their families. The authority has a clear understanding of local needs, based upon a detailed wide ranging self-assessment; it has identified how they will be met through precise targeted actions. Good progress is evident against most, but not all, issues identified in the 2005 APA. The Children's Services Department has been operational for 18 months. It has good capacity to reshape services and improve outcomes for all children and young people in the area.

## **Being healthy**

The authority makes an outstanding contribution towards improving the health of children and young people in the area. Partnership working is highly effective in collecting a range of information about the health of children and young people. Links with the Youth Service and other agencies that provide specialist advice to young people on health and personal issues have been significantly improved during the last year. Healthy lifestyles are promoted very well in many schools through the Healthy Schools Award and all schools offer good counselling services. There is a dedicated transition service for all 16 to 17 year-olds. School inspection evidence demonstrates good and outstanding practice in relation to supporting learners to be healthy.

Teenage pregnancy rates have fallen and there is very effective innovative work taking place under the remit of the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). Looked-after children have very good access to health assessment and provision.

There is a range of successful parenting initiatives including those for Bengali parents and for the traveller community.

## **Staying Safe**

The contribution that the council's services make to improved outcomes for children and young people in this area is outstanding. Despite an increase in child protection case conferences and registrations this year, rigorous monitoring has ensured that all child protection cases have been reviewed on time and re-registrations and de-registrations are in line with the performance of similar councils. The council has successfully ensured that no child has been on the child protection register for more than two years. School inspections show that arrangements for child protection and for Criminal Record Bureau checks are good or better. Inspections in seven schools found that the extent to which pupils were kept safe ranged from good to outstanding. Inter-agency child protection procedures have been reviewed and reissued, with extensive publicity and training across a range of agencies and an awareness raising campaign for the public. In addition, the Safeguarding Children Board has successfully delivered a number of initiatives including a substantial booklet about 'safe parenting' for all parents of children over the age of five,

and a town-wide anti-bullying and discrimination strategy. Urgent actions arising from last year's Youth Service Inspection have been effectively acted upon and progress here has been rapid.

The number of initial assessments of vulnerable children undertaken within target timescales has improved, and the number of core assessments undertaken on time is now very good.

The short term stability of looked-after children's placements continues to be very good. Whilst effective work to improve longer term stability for looked-after children is on-going, more work is still required to improve matters further. All reviews of looked-after children have been completed on time.

A CSCI fostering inspection showed a well-managed service which provides suitable carers from a diverse range of backgrounds, with positive outcomes for children. The inspection of the adoption service found it was a child-focused service which also provides good outcomes. Inspections of Darlington's five residential children's homes found that almost all standards have been met. Socially acceptable behaviour was encouraged, and children knew how to complain and were encouraged to do so if they were unhappy.

There has been a small increase in the number of looked-after children this year. There is a focus on permanence planning, and the number of adoption orders has increased, although it remains lower than comparators. All children were placed within 12 months of their best interest decision. As Darlington is a relatively small council, statistical patterns tend to fluctuate in response to events relating to a small number of children. Some 90% of children aged 14 and over with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have a transition plan. Increasingly effective specialist services are provided for the gypsy and travelling communities.

## **Enjoying and achieving**

The contribution that the council's services for children and young people make to improving outcomes overall in this area is adequate. The quality of early years provision is good. There are sufficient places of high quality and an appropriate priority is given to pupils with learning needs and/or disabilities and vulnerable pupils. Provision is well distributed across the borough, enabling suitable access for young children and adults. Staff receive appropriate training opportunities to help them meet the needs of all children.

Key Stage 1 results have improved and are now above national and statistical neighbour averages in reading, writing and mathematics. At Key Stages 2 and 3, standards are broadly in line with comparators, although higher level achievers should be doing better.

Standards at Key Stage 4 improved markedly in 2005 and are now good for pupils achieving five GCSE A\* to C grades. However, GCSE grade A\* to G pass rates remain below those of statistical neighbours. The progress which pupils make between Key Stages 2 to 3 and 2 to 4 is still below average and in line with the 2005 APA findings.

Gender differences remain in performance at each key stage and, whilst progress has been achieved in narrowing the gap at Key Stage 2, it has widened at Key Stage 3. Pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make satisfactory progress because of the increasingly effective and targeted support which they receive. Good progress is made by pupils in schools within the intensive support programme. The progress made by minority ethnic groups is variable; achievement of traveller groups remains well below average, although innovative schemes such as the lending of laptops to support pupils when away from Darlington improves their learning.

The performance of looked-after children who achieved one GCSE grade A\* to G fell in 2005 from a high level in 2004 and is now in line with national averages but just below the average of statistical neighbours. However, the proportion of looked-after children who achieved five GCSE A\* to C grades more than doubled and is now well above comparative averages. The numbers included in both indicators are very small.

As a consequence of revised protocols and targeted action by the local authority, the degree of challenge exerted on schools to improve has been greatly strengthened, in particular towards those secondary schools which are underperforming. These changes have effectively clarified the respective roles of schools and the local authority and significantly raised expectations regarding performance. Clear lines of accountability with respect to pupil outcomes have been defined. Despite significant efforts by authority staff since the previous APA, attendance remains low compared to national averages, and the rate of exclusions continues to be high.

## **Making a positive contribution**

The contribution that the council's services for children and young people make to improving outcomes overall in this area is outstanding. There is a youth participation strategy, and a higher than average number of young people are reached by the youth service. A new participation and innovation team involves young people in decision making.

Young people are extensively involved in service planning and strategic development, and are engaged in a wide range of activities. These include community appraisals, the youth parliament, school councils, a health group and specialist consultation opportunities. The 'West Side' initiative, which provides music and other activities for young people, has increased participation and reduced anti-social behaviour. There has been very good

consultation with hard to reach groups to test out policies; accessible sport and leisure activities have been developed for children with disabilities.

Corporate parenting arrangements are well established and have significant impact. A high number of looked-after children contribute to their reviews, and the percentage of final warnings and convictions of looked-after children has reduced significantly this year. A looked-after children's group has been established with 30 children attending monthly meetings. A group of looked-after children is producing a video for residential care staff and foster carers on communicating with young people. Children in foster placements are able to give their views about their lives and the care they receive, and their contact with family and friends is successfully promoted.

A contract with an independent advocacy service ensures that advocacy is available when needed.

There are very good outcomes from school inspections. Nurture groups support the transition of vulnerable pupils into Year 7 in three secondary schools very effectively.

The number of first time entrants to the Youth Justice System has reduced and recidivism rates are in line with comparators.

CSCI inspections identified that some children's homes were insufficiently involved in the assessment of young people, and that improved independent support for birth parents and families of adoptive children is needed.

## **Achieving economic well-being**

The contribution that the council's services for children and young people make to improving outcomes in this area is good overall. Provision for 14 to 19 year-olds is well coordinated, with effective working between partners, including the Learning and Skills Council. Inspection reports highlight post-16 educational provision as being high quality. Inspections of secondary schools demonstrate that supporting pupils to achieve economic well-being is good.

Standards in GCSE and vocational subjects (5 A\*-C) are now above those achieved by Darlington's statistical neighbours and above national averages. Standards in GCSE and vocational subjects (5 A\*-G) remain below statistical neighbours and national averages. Vocational options continue to expand and are more appropriate in meeting the needs of some learners, although further progress is still needed to achieve the full range of provision required. Notable examples of effective practice are emerging. For example, the 'Skills+' provision, based at Darlington College, is successfully engaging those 14 to 16 year-old students at most risk of disaffection. Over 70 students participated in this

vocational training throughout 2005/06; this is projected to increase to 140 students in 2006/07. There is, however, insufficient monitoring of the quality of provision in 14 to 19 placements and this remains a significant issue to be addressed. Minority ethnic learners at Sure Start have successfully completed courses, for example in ICT, English and mathematics, and have benefited from employment awareness raising sessions.

Pathway plans for care leavers and transition plans for children with disabilities are monitored effectively. Multi-agency working ensures that timely reviews of pupils' needs are considered and future provision matched appropriately. The number of looked-after children aged 19 in education, employment and training has increased to a relatively high level; these students are well supported on work-based learning schemes. Inspection evidence confirms that the fostering service and foster carers contribute well towards the preparation of young people for transition to adulthood. Over 90% of care leavers are in adequate housing with none in bed and breakfast accommodation. A higher proportion of young offenders in Darlington, supervised by the youth offending team, are in full-time education to employment schemes than is the case nationally or in statistical neighbour areas.

The Sure Start local programme is effective in supporting young parents who wish to return to learning. An appropriate range of childcare places is offered by the private, voluntary and independent sectors with further day care provision at Children's Centres. There are over 1,000 maintained nursery education places with further discussions ongoing to provide integrated full day care for 3 and 4 year-olds in line with the Childcare strategy. Sure Start programmes have also continued to impact positively on the number of children living in households where parents are not working, allowing a significant number of parents to access training.

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

The council has a four star comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) rating, and the Audit Commission's 'Direction of Travel' statement assessed the council as 'improving well'.

There is a strong culture of partnership working in Darlington, with statutory and voluntary organisations, the private and independent sectors, and members of the community working together under the auspices of the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP). There is a Citizens' Panel of over 1,000 residents. Local services share common objectives and targets for improving the well-being of children and young people in the area. Young people are a priority for the council, and the focus of its Local Area Agreement.

There is close working between the Children's Services Department and the local Primary Care Trust, with the pooling of budgets through local agreements, where appropriate, to ensure that services can be developed flexibly. A range of local and national non-statutory providers are used to deliver services where this will improve outcomes, including homelessness advice, play schemes and independent advocacy.

Darlington LSP has adopted a social inclusion strategy called 'All Together', which includes race equality matters. The council has achieved Level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Government. There has been a robust audit of need, involving the participation of children, young people and their families, who have been involved in developing the statement of priorities and designing services. Children and young people's views are listened to and increasingly acted upon.

The Children's Services Department was established in April 2005, and the responsibilities of the Director of Children's Services and lead member are appropriately discharged. Corporate Parenting arrangements are working well and are making a difference. A Safeguarding Children Board is taking a proactive approach to improving outcomes for children.

The organisational culture in children's social care has led to a more secure improvement trajectory than in education services, but a significant change agenda is now being put into place in education, which the council expects will start to be reflected in improved outcomes for children next year. In particular, the council's redefinition of its challenge and support role with schools has substantially heightened expectations about schools' performance and the manner to which they will be held accountable. Full implementation of these revised protocols is scheduled for September 2006. Furthermore, innovative educational provision based on an all-age Education Village including a federation of schools and the development of school improvement clusters to better respond to localised circumstances, demonstrates high ambition. There is a culture of performance management in the council, with service plans being translated into action plans and targets for staff. This planning is integrated with financial planning. Expenditure patterns show that, although the cost of children's services is lower than in similar councils, good outcomes are generally achieved, particularly in social care.

Darlington's Children's Services is developing a workforce strategy. In social care, the level of staff vacancies, sickness absence and training provision are all good, and all staff are suitably skilled and qualified, including in children's homes, and in the fostering and adoption services. No problems are reported with recruitment and retention.

## Key strengths and areas for improvement

Key strengths	Key areas for improvement
<p><i>Being healthy:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>looked-after children have good access to health assessment and services</li> <li>dedicated CAMHS services for looked-after children, children in need and children who have experienced abuse</li> <li>high percentage of schools have healthy schools award.</li> </ul>	<p><i>Being healthy:</i></p>
<p><i>Staying safe:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>strong focus on child protection issues across Darlington and good performance against indicators</li> <li>short term stability of placements of looked-after children is very good</li> <li>fostering service provides good outcomes for children.</li> </ul>	<p><i>Staying safe:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>long term stability of looked-after children needs to improve further.</li> </ul>
<p><i>Enjoying and achieving:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>good progress of schools on the intensive support programme</li> <li>increase in the number of looked-after children with five A* to C grade GCSEs</li> <li>good early years provision and adequacy of places.</li> </ul>	<p><i>Enjoying and achieving:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>insufficient progress made by pupils at Key Stages 3 and 4</li> <li>attendance and exclusion rates</li> <li>implementation of revised school challenge and support protocols.</li> </ul>
<p><i>Making a positive contribution:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>higher than national average of young people reached by the Youth Service</li> <li>young people extensively involved in service planning and strategic development</li> <li>innovative project in one locality to increase participation and reduce anti-social behaviour.</li> </ul>	<p><i>Making a positive contribution:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>independent support is needed for birth parents and families of adoptive children.</li> </ul>
<p><i>Achieving economic well-being:</i></p>	<p><i>Achieving economic well-being:</i></p>



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• good provision for families to access training matched to good availability of childcare places</li> <li>• good vocational provision for pupils at risk of disaffection (Skills+)</li> <li>• good special educational needs transition planning with effective engagement of young people and their families.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• need to improve quality assurance of education and workplace provision.</li> </ul>
<p><i>Management of children's services</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• robust audit of need resulting in a clear statement of priorities</li> <li>• corporate parenting arrangements working well and making a difference</li> <li>• strong performance management linked to financial planning.</li> </ul>	<p><i>Management of children's services:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ensure full compliance with revised school challenge and support protocols.</li> </ul>

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

- The impact of challenge and support provided for schools.
- The quality assurance of education and workplace provision.
- The progress made by pupils at Key Stages 3 and 4.

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**  
 Divisional Manager  
 Office for Standards in Education



**JONATHAN PHILLIPS**  
 Director – Quality, Performance and Methods  
 Commission for Social Care Inspection