

17 December 2008

Dr Helen Paterson
Director of Children's Services
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Dear Dr Paterson

Annual performance assessment of services for children and young people in Sunderland City 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	3
Staying safe	3
Enjoying and achieving	3
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

Sunderland City Council delivers services for children and young people that are consistently above the minimum requirements for users. The council's capacity to improve, including its management of services is good.

The Council has responded positively to the issues raised in the JAR in December 2007. A revised children and young people's plan, which takes account of a greater number of users' views from across the council, reflects well on the identified needs of the local area. Partnership links remain strong in almost all outcome areas, with very impressive support for looked after children and those with identified learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Preventative strategies for offending and re-offending are outstanding. In almost all other areas, the council is delivering above the minimum requirements for children and young people in Sunderland. Senior officers and members are fully committed to making continued improvements in services. However, many significant developments that include increased participation of children and young people in design, planning and evaluation of services, the promotion of equality and diversity, and changes to member scrutiny are either at an early stage of development or, are ongoing. The council's assessment of the impact of these developments on improving children's services is insufficient, especially where there is commissioning or other funding aspects involved.

Being healthy

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
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A good multi-agency focus on working to narrow the gap in health inequalities with integrated planning. ▪ Health advice to, and support for looked after children is very good and improving. ▪ The child and adolescent mental health service is assessed as good and is performing above statistical neighbours. ▪ Close working between agencies ensures the early identification of children with disabilities.
Important weaknesses and areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The number of schools involved in the Healthy Schools Programme has slowed during the last year. The council has acknowledged this and has implemented a recovery plan.

Staying safe

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 awarded.

Major strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Effective multi-agency working ensures appropriate support for vulnerable children. The youth offending team provides outstanding support. Decisive action has significantly reduced the number of children at risk cases managed by social workers. This was an important weakness identified in the JAR. Very good arrangements are in place for reviewing plans. All child protection reviews were held on time and those for looked after children exceeded the proportion achieved in similar council areas and nationally.
Important weaknesses and areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The percentage of core assessments completed within nationally prescribed timescales is below those achieved in similar council areas. Despite some improvements this year a small number of children's homes do not comply fully with the national minimum standards.

Enjoying and achieving

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
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The council provides effective challenge and support for all early years settings and schools, which has resulted in year-on-year improvements in national tests and assessments. Unvalidated test data indicates further improvement is being maintained. Attendance is improving at both primary and secondary levels. Four of the five targeted 'persistent absence' schools have made good progress and are on target to meet an 8% reduction in absence. The rate of permanent exclusions in secondary schools is very low and all children educated out of school receive at least 20 or more hours of tuition/teaching per week. This is very good compared to similar council areas.
Important weaknesses and areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Despite a reduction in the proportion of schools in an Ofsted category of concern the figure remains above similar council areas.

- Only 80% of looked after children have a personal educational plan and this is below the performance achieved in similar council areas.

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 in this outcome area underestimate a number of important weaknesses and overvalue the areas where progress has been made. The table below sets out the evidence for the grade awarded.

Major strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The council has increased the involvement of children and young people in decision-making activities, particularly in taking greater account of their views for the revised children and young people's plan. ▪ Sunderland has a range of nationally acclaimed and award winning strategies to prevent offending and re-offending. These strategies have contributed to an 8.5% reduction in re-offending rates compared to the national target of 5%, and a reduction to 4.3% compared to the national target of 5% for first time entries into the youth justice system. ▪ There is good involvement of looked after children in a range of activities that directly affect their educational and care provision, including the attendance of some children and young people at corporate parenting meetings. ▪ There are a number of initiatives for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, including 'city equals', which provide an effective forum for debate and discussion. These children and young people are well represented on the Youth Parliament.
Important weaknesses and areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The council's 'participation strategy' aims to involve more children and young people from across the city in designing, planning and evaluating the quality of children's services. The strategy has just been endorsed by the Children's Trust and is due to be implemented shortly. There is insufficient indication of how the council will monitor and evaluate this strategy's impact on improving services for children and young people, especially those deemed vulnerable.

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

- Extensive range of courses to prepare 14- to 19-year-olds for the world of work, including apprenticeships and the newly introduced diplomas.
- Strong working relationships and coordinated actions from the council and its partners are helping to reduce the number of children and young people not in employment, education and training. The proportion of young people in employment, education or training is now the best in the region.
- The number of apprenticeships has risen since the joint area review and is now above similar areas.
- Good provision to encourage looked after children and care leavers into work.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- The proportion of young people gaining Level 3 is below statistical neighbours' and national averages.
- Not all care leavers are in suitable living accommodation.

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 and its management of these services is also good.

The council has implemented a number of important changes over the past year, many of which have continued to build on existing successes, and some of which are responses to the issues raised in the 2007 JAR. The council remains ambitious to improve services for children and young people by developing a more targeted prioritisation of needs through its revised children and young people's plan. Partnership links remain strong, and provide a firm foundation for the future development of children's services.

The council's commitment to increasing young people's participation in service provision is seen clearly in the recently endorsed 'participation strategy', which is now at the stage of being implemented and is linked to improved commissioning arrangements. Work on equality and diversity still has some way to go to ensure coverage of all aspects of gender, race and disability. The Building Schools for the Future initiative is developing well, but the impact on reducing surplus places at secondary level is not clear, given that this issue was raised in the corporate assessment inspection in 2007. All these initiatives have gone on in parallel to some restructuring of political systems, particularly in scrutiny, in order that there is better overall accountability of all aspects of the children's service provision. However, many of these changes are at a relatively early stage of implementation or development, which means that the council cannot yet be sure that all the improvements it seeks are being achieved and are cost-effective. Overall, the self-assessment has been overly positive about some important initiatives, which have yet to be fully implemented and evaluated for impact.

Major strengths

- Strong commitment of leaders and managers at all levels to continuing improvements in children's services.
- Improved alignment of resources to priorities, including commissioning arrangements.
- Performance management is well embedded in the work ethic of the council, and includes improved use of performance data aligned to financial management.
- Effective action taken since the JAR has improved performance in staying safe for vulnerable children and young people.

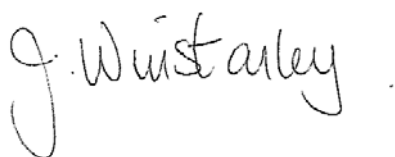
Important weaknesses and areas for development

- There is insufficient assessment of impact by the council of its initiatives to improve the quality of provision for children's services, especially where there is commissioning or other funding aspects involved.
- Despite the council's achievement of Level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Government, its promotion of equality and diversity does not yet make explicit how all aspects of gender, race and disability are being promoted.

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