



North Tyneside Council

# OUTSTANDING ACHIEVEMENT

From children's services and SEND to youth justice: the inside track on North Tyneside Council's success story



• Elected mayor of North Tyneside, Norma Redfearn CBE

We're ambitious here in North Tyneside and want our borough to be the best place for children and families to live, grow up and thrive. We want all young people to have the best start in life and the opportunity to reach their potential and realise their dreams.

It is by all working together with our colleagues, our partners, our families, and our young people that we can achieve this vision.

We are so proud of our fantastic children's services teams who show each and every day how much they care by putting young people at the heart of all that they do and making sure their voices are heard.



# Sharing the spoils of success

Spanish City, Whitley Bay

North Tyneside Council's achievements in children's services, youth justice and SEND have put it in the spotlight. It's only too happy to share learning while striving to be even better, discovers

**Austin Macauley**



**Jacqui Old**  
Director of children's  
and adult services

**W**hen North Tyneside Council received a glowing report earlier this year for the way it supports children with special education needs and disabilities, it marked a hat-trick of successes.

Over the last two years, both children's services and the youth justice service have been rated outstanding – making North Tyneside only the second local authority to achieve the feat.

Throw in last year's MJ Achievement Award for workforce transformation and it's no wonder local authorities are turning to this corner of the North East for inspiration.

Success on this scale has inevitably led to a good deal of reflection among staff to figure out what's gone right in North Tyneside.

But you only have to look at the council's SEND inspection report to get an inkling: 'Leaders are not complacent. They recognise they do not always get things right and that they are on a journey of continuous improvement... Leaders have a robust process of self-evaluation. They are determined to know what is working and what needs changing.'

Or as Jacqui Old, director of children's and adult services, puts it: 'Every day is a school day.'

She admits to an 'element of nervousness' about the council's success story in what's a 'fragile area' and that the overriding goal still remains to be best local authority for children in terms of providing a safe, happy and healthy place to grow up in, and where every

young person has opportunities and a voice.

But success has given North Tyneside a platform to share learning, whether it's directly supporting other councils as a DfE Partner in Practice (PiP) or through magazine supplements like this.

North Tyneside sits to the east of Newcastle and includes the coastal towns of Whitley Bay, North Shields and Tynemouth. It shares many of the social and economic challenges facing other post-industrial areas of the North East in terms of deprivation and inequality while being home to some of the region's most desirable places to live.

In short, it's a place that many parts of the country can relate to.

'We wouldn't say by any means that we've cracked it,' says Jacqui. 'But some things that we have done have moved us to a stronger position in how we support children.'

'We've done a lot of soul searching on how we've managed to achieve the hat-trick we have got. I'm not sure many other local authorities have achieved that. There's definitely something about what we do and how we do it. We have learned a lot from other people and want to pay back by helping others.'

As a PiP, everyone from senior managers to frontline social workers from Jacqui's team have taken part in workshops to help other local authorities 'try to change gear' and think about the processes they have got. It's a two-way process and staff are often inspired by work in other areas.

Drawing on what's worked – and what hasn't – Jacqui has distilled North Tyneside's learning down to some key factors.

## **Connect the vision with your workforce**

'Having vision and leadership is great but it's got to be more than words on a piece of paper. You've got to connect with people. That vision needs to be owned by

everybody in a language everybody understands. I can't overstate the amount of time you need to coral people and bring them together. Understand where you are now and think about what some of the options are in terms of where you want to be.

'When I came into this role, practice had become very much focused on legislation and requirements around that. It was quite mechanistic and almost automated in the way staff were approaching conversations with children and families. Nobody was happy with it and it felt a bit "tick box". We also had segmented teams that were quite siloed.

'We broke down some of the things that had become inherent in the way we were working.

'But we needed everybody speaking the same language and understanding what the ground rules were – we hadn't used a model of practice before and we went for Signs of Safety – building on the strengths of a child's family network.'

'We had spent so much time talking with our workforce and trying to understand things from their perspective that once we had made the decision on Signs of Safety we could jump straight into the deep end knowing they were behind us.

'We also reconfigured to have smaller teams and a lower ratio. It means there's better management oversight and support. Staff say they feel more comfortable to have discussions and talk about the complexity of cases they are dealing with.'

## **Work at pace**

'One of the mistakes we had previously made was we talked about changing the culture and the way people do things and then we'd set up a training programme that would be spread over three years. It's too long and became diluted.'

'We implemented Signs of Safety across the whole system at pace. We decided everybody would be trained and working with it within a year.

'That in itself created appetite, energy and



and keep staff and make sure North Tyneside Council is a place people want to come and work.

'We have low caseloads, good support and good supervision. But we've also improved the physical environment and have brought disparate teams together so they can have regular conversations. Also, we've done softer things around supporting mental health (via MH first aiders), massage and yoga sessions, and mindfulness walks.

'People talk about North Tyneside as a family firm. One reason is we're a non-hierarchical organisation. I see frontline staff every day to talk to and the elected mayor and cabinet are also easily accessible and they absolutely care about children in North Tyneside. As an ex-headteacher, the mayor constantly looks to improve the opportunities for children in the borough – it's something she lives and breathes.'

**Co-location breaks down barriers**

'Our front door involves 10 partners. When we get a child with complex issues people don't just refer or send an email. They have a dynamic and timely conversation about who is best placed to work with that child, involving early help, education and health.

'One of the interesting things I've observed is if you take a particular child, someone in education will use a particular language, someone in the NHS will use different language, someone in social care will use something different again. So everybody has their own way of describing what's usually the same problem. Getting people sitting next to each other breaks down that language barrier and helps you define what the issues are.'

**Senior managers – get out of the way!**

'I'm somebody that likes to know where I'm going to, I like attention to detail. Sometimes as a director you have to be able to step back from that and allow people who really understand what it's like, for example within the front door, to design the process.

'We've been successful in areas like that because they have been designed, reviewed and improved by frontline staff as opposed to the likes of me! It's about giving people sufficient breathing space and airtime.' ●

enthusiasm that we had not really seen before.

'The excitement for the whole workforce that they had about changing the way they talked to and listened to children and families – it created a totally different context. It wasn't just children's social care, but also within education and our partners.'

**Eliminate the fear factor and build on strengths**

'One of the things I have always been mindful of when you work in a complex, high risk environment is staff can end up working in fear. We all know that's not the environment to get the best out of anybody. Staff are your biggest asset and you need to invest in

their learning and development. Commit funding to do that.

'The strengths-based practice that we brought in equally applies to staff. Don't focus on "this is wrong", but what are you good at, what have you done well?

'As a result, we have changed appraisals and supervision to a strengths-based model. That reinforces our way of working with families and our partners are now working in the same way.'

**Recruitment is challenging so be the best workplace**

'We've put a lot of thought into how we can attract

# A forum for improvement

**E**nsuring the voices of children and families are heard loud and clear has been a key factor in North Tyneside's success around SEND.

Inspectors from Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission praised the influential roles of both North Tyneside Parent Carer Forum and other platforms set up by the council such as the SEND youth forum.

It's part and parcel of an approach that's focused on what their report, published in January, described as 'a robust process self-evaluation' to act on feedback from children and families.

Responding to the report, Jo Gilliland, who is chair of the parent carer forum and whose son is a member of the SEND youth forum, echoed their findings.

'I'm pleased that this report reflects how there are lots of people working really hard here in North Tyneside to make a difference to young people with SEND and their families. But it also recognises that no one is complacent and that more needs to be done to ensure that all our young people can reach their potential.'

Engaging young people and involving them in the process of improving provision is vital, says



**NORTH TYNESIDE'S SUCCESS STORY**

Children's services – outstanding (2020)

Youth justice service – outstanding (2021)

SEND – 'strong' outcomes (2022)

MJ Achievement Awards 2021 – winner for workforce transformation

Jacqui Old, director of children's and adult services.

'One of the things I'm massively proud of is the way children with additional needs now help us to shape what the future should look like for them. They challenge us when we might assume things.'

**North Tyneside as a Partner in Practice: helping others to succeed**

'We really do appreciate the time & commitment which has been put into what has been a very positive experience for us here in Durham... North Tyneside have given us a lot of "food for thought" and we will certainly be putting into practice a number of recommendations which we will share with the service.'

• Durham County Council

'The new team has a coherent structure, robust leadership and right profile of skilled staff to manage risk, make appropriate decisions and engage effectively with partners... Access to our early help services is now, for the first time, via the same route as referrals for children's social care... allowing an overview of need across the continuum.'

• North Somerset Council

'We have implemented recommendations and standardised an approach to engagement and change management, this is supporting our teams and change processes... We have strengthened our engagement with teams to make sure user experience of the system and the way in which it supports practice is leading change.'

• Sheffield City Council



# Justice served

**Strong partnerships and a sense of shared understanding have enabled North Tyneside to ensure child offenders get appropriate support**

**W**hen you have a period of consistency and stability you have to make the most of that opportunity.'

Pete Xeros and his team have certainly done that. North Tyneside's youth justice service, which he manages, was rated outstanding by Government inspectors following an inspection last year.

The achievement was several years in the making and while it's hard to sum up the many things that contributed to success, he believes the commitment of key individuals and strong partnerships between organisations have been essential along with a dedicated experienced team.

The youth justice service is made up of staff from the local authority's social care and education services, the police, the National Probation Service and local health services.

Staff come and go across all organisations but two years prior to the inspection there had been a period of stability within the council, strong relationships with police officers from Northumbria Police's harm reduction unit and a new police and crime commissioner whose approach chimed with that of the service.

It provided an opportunity to tackle one of the area's key challenges and what has subsequently been cited by inspectors as an area of strength – first-time entrants to the criminal justice system.

Historically, North Tyneside had very high levels of first-time entrants with a staggering 600 children back in 2007 out of a youth population of just 17,000. This was a national issue.

The culture within the system has changed hugely since then, Pete explains, but he and colleagues felt that while numbers were falling, too

many children – with increasingly complex needs – were still effectively being criminalised.

The six youth justice services in Northumbria Police's patch worked together to create a new pathway via out-of-court disposal panel whereby lower-level offences were dealt with by a multi-agency panel rather than the police. They produced a single protocol and assessment tool across the six areas.

It was accompanied by the introduction of Outcome 22 (deferred prosecution) through which a child takes steps to atone for their behaviour, such as writing a letter to the victim, community payback and direct work with the team to address behaviours.

'The whole process is informed by a trauma-led approach to start to understand the child in different ways,' says Pete. 'Our cohort has a high level of complex needs. So it's about balancing their welfare with risk and public protection.

'It's not about children "getting off", but recognising they are first and foremost children.

'If you're a first-time entrant it means you have a police record and that could inhibit future opportunities.

'This was a means of fulfilling a police responsibility in partnership in a way that reframes it around the needs of the child and family whilst ensuring victims needs are considered.'

From having 81 first-time entrants in 2017-18, North Tyneside recorded just 12 in 2021-22.

'It's a flatter process now whereas before it was an escalator to prison. But it could only have been developed and delivered with that relationship and collaboration we have – in an environment of respect and understanding.' ●

## A hub of understanding

**Ever-evolving multi-agency working lies at the heart of success in children's services**

**O**ne of the key factors in North Tyneside's journey to outstanding children's services has been the success of its multi-agency safeguarding hub.

Ofsted inspectors praised the way partners had improved the impact and effectiveness of the MASH. For example, daily triage meetings with the police ensure any concerns are dealt with quickly, while the development of an early help hub ensures cases are stepped up and down appropriately and easily.

Carrie Barron, principal social worker, says success ultimately comes down to relationships between partners and a shared understanding of what's happening in a child's journey.

What partners take away from the MASH is as important as what they bring, she says.

'Making time to get to know people is important. What's it like in schools, what are health colleagues dealing with on a daily basis? Each partner has their own pressures to deal with so it's about using everybody's skills and experience to live those discussions we have together.'

She believes police now have a far clearer understanding of what happens to a child they have referred to children's social care. This knowledge and broader understanding can be invaluable, for example when officers have to make home visits to deal with incidents.

The council's adoption of Signs of Safety (SoS) is helping to create a common approach and language among practitioners within the MASH, she says. For social workers, the success of SoS and the MASH have been a boon.

'It fits with social work values in terms of working our way out of families' lives so they can live their life as they wanted to, as long as children are safe and their needs are met.

'We don't want dependency and neither do our partners in the MASH.' ●