

Services for vulnerable children in the Northeast rated Outstanding

Improved services in one of the most deprived councils in England are making a real difference to vulnerable children's and families lives.

'Tenacious' social workers in Sunderland – where services have today been [rated Outstanding](#) by Ofsted after having been deemed 'inadequate' since 2015 – have been praised by Ofsted inspectors for their persistence in developing powerful relationships with children in their care and for putting their voices at the heart of services.

The swift improvements are thanks to 'unstinting commitment' from a voluntary trust established by the Government, in collaboration with Sunderland Council, to tackle entrenched failure, and the 'significant cultural change' staff have driven.

It makes Sunderland the first council to jump straight from failing in its children's services to the highest rating in one inspection cycle.

Services were placed into a trust, [Together for Children](#), in April 2017, part of a major Government reform programme to tackle persistent underperformance in areas where vulnerable children and families have been systematically failed.

Children and Families Minister Vicky Ford said:

It is so easy to focus on the challenges facing social workers, councils and children's services, without taking time to acknowledge or champion success.

The vast improvements in Sunderland demonstrate the importance of Government intervening swiftly and decisively where children and families are being failed, so that the right support is in place to level up outcomes and transform lives.

We have a duty to every child in our care to give them the same opportunities as their peers, so we cannot stand by in the face of entrenched failings.

I'm enormously proud of the positive change leaders and staff in Sunderland have achieved, working tirelessly to continue raising the bar even as the pressures of the pandemic took hold.

I'm also pleased to see the success of its early help and intervention work, meaning more families are supported to stay together safely, breaking the cycle of neglect too many have experienced in the past.

Work is now underway with the Department for Education to explore how leaders in Sunderland and Together for Children can share their experiences with other councils to help make improvements elsewhere in lower performing areas.

The Department will continue working with Sunderland to ensure it stays on track, including through the creation of an 'Edge of Care' hub where vulnerable families receive dedicated support, avoiding the need for costly placements and reducing the number of children in care.

Today's Outstanding judgement means six of the 12 local authorities in the northeast of England are now high performing, despite a high rate of children in care (107 per 10,000) and higher than average deprivation levels.

It joins North Tyneside in the top judgement category, with Gateshead, South Tyneside, Northumberland and Hartlepool now rated Good by the inspectorate. North and South Tyneside and Hartlepool are already working with other councils to share learnings as part of the Department for Education's Sector Led Improvement Partners (SLIP) programme.

Sunderland is one of eight trusts set up since 2010 to run children's services on behalf of an underperforming council, including Doncaster where, after years of failure services were rated 'good' by Ofsted in January 2018 and in Birmingham where services are no longer inadequate after nearly a decade of failure.

Since May 2010, where the Government has provided support, 50 local authorities have been lifted out – and stayed out – of intervention.

The Children's Minister recently announced a [regional recovery fund](#) for children's social care, backed by £24 million, to level up outcomes for the most vulnerable and tackling the most pressing issues they face in those areas.

Alongside this, the independent review of children's social care continues to look at where the system can do more to transform outcomes for children. Led by Josh MacAlister, it will identify how to keep children safe from harm, both at home and outside the home, as well as how to support families to stay together safely and tackling the inconsistencies in practice that exist across the country.