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17 December 2008

Mr Richard Hubbard  
Director of Children's Services  
Worcestershire County Council  
County Hall  
Spetchley Road  
Worcester  
WR5 2NP

Dear Mr Hubbard

## **Annual performance assessment of services for children and young people in Worcestershire County 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.

<b>Assessment judgement area</b>	<b>APA grade</b>
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

Worcestershire County Council provides services for children and young people that are consistently above the minimum requirements. The council sustains good performance across the different areas of its work and progress has been made in responding to the recommendations made in the 2007 APA. Children and young people’s services have good capacity to improve further and the management of services is also good. The combined work of all local services in promoting healthy lifestyles has ensured that the health of children and young people is good. Very high priority is given to safeguarding all children and young people and effective strategies provide a safe environment across the county. The council has good strategies to help children and young people enjoy their education and to achieve well, especially in narrowing the gap between the performance of schools in the area. The council recognises the need to raise the standards reached by children at the end of the Foundation Stage. There is a strong focus on involving children and young people in making decisions about the services they receive, although there remains room to make this contribution even more effective. Rapidly improving achievements by young people and a substantial reduction in those not in education, employment or training demonstrate the good impact of services to ensure that the majority of young people achieve economic well-being.

## Being healthy

Grade 3

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. Although some outstanding outcomes have been maintained since the 2007 APA, the council’s self-evaluation has overestimated the progress and the strength of outcomes in this area. The table below sets out the evidence for the grade awarded.

<b>Major strengths</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Healthy lifestyles are promoted well. Children and young people are generally healthy and effective action is being taken to tackle longstanding health inequalities. Good local knowledge about health needs and closely monitored strategies have resulted in effective targeting of smoking cessation programmes and substance misuse treatment services for young people.</li> <li>▪ The child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) strategy is effective. There is good integration of CAMHS with a wide range of services. Emotional well-being is at the heart of services in children’s centres and extended schools, which are well located throughout the county.</li> <li>▪ Looked after children are fully involved in the Healthy Care Partnership and are engaged well in community and leisure activities. Access to specialist services is good.</li> <li>▪ Children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have good access to a full range of health services to maintain their health and mental well-being. Nearly all have good plans for transition to adult health services.</li> </ul>

<p><b>Important weaknesses and areas for development</b></p>
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Teenage conception rates have been variable and most recent data indicates a sharp increase. The rate of reduction since the 1998 baseline is significantly below statistical neighbours and the national average.</li> <li>▪ Performance on securing health and dental checks for looked after children has not improved for four years against a steady improvement trend nationally. The percentage for the area (82%) is now just below the national average (85%).</li> </ul> |
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## Staying safe

## Grade 3

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. There are a number of outstanding features in the preventative strategies provided for keeping children and young people safe. The council's self-evaluation of the grade overvalues the areas where progress has been made and undervalues the areas for development in this outcome area. The table below sets out the evidence for the grade awarded.

<p><b>Major strengths</b></p>
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ There is outstanding prioritisation of safeguarding issues in the area with a strong lead from a good Local Safeguarding Children Board. Serious incidents are reviewed thoroughly and safeguarding outcomes are analysed effectively.</li> <li>▪ Children and young people's views have had a good impact on improving the safety of their environment, such as setting safer routes to school.</li> <li>▪ The wide range of support services, including partnerships with health and voluntary sector providers, minimise the incidence of abuse and neglect and prevent children coming into care. The proportions of children and young people subject to protection plans or looked after are low and significantly below national averages.</li> <li>▪ Referral and assessment services accurately identify children in need of protection. Child protection procedures are carried out very well and all are reviewed on time.</li> <li>▪ High quality integrated services for looked after children provide good access to a wide range of support services and excellent performance on timeliness of their reviews. Integrated services give children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities prompt access to child protection services.</li> </ul> |
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<p><b>Important weaknesses and areas for development</b></p>
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The timeliness of initial assessments remains below the national average and that of statistical neighbours.</li> <li>▪ The anti-bullying strategy, revised in 2007 in accordance with children and young people's concerns, has not been fully implemented.</li> </ul> |
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## 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.

<p><b>Major strengths</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The council's school improvement strategy, which categorises schools and prioritises additional support, has contributed well to narrowing the performance gap that exists between schools.</li> <li>▪ An outstanding range of additional support through the multi-agency integrated services for looked after children has improved the educational attainment of looked after children at Key Stages 2 and 3 and the attainment gap with other children in Worcestershire has narrowed.</li> <li>▪ Attendance rates, including those of looked after children, are improving and are now slightly above those of similar councils and fixed-term exclusion levels in secondary schools are much lower than the national average and those in similar councils.</li> <li>▪ The upward trend of improvement at Key Stage 4 is faster than that occurring in similar councils and nationally.</li> <li>▪ Very effective support is provided to Traveller families resulting in many younger Traveller children being integrated fully into mainstream schools.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Important weaknesses and areas for development</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The percentage of children, at the end of the Foundation Stage, meeting the national benchmark for the personal, social and emotional scale and the communication, language and literacy scale is well below the national average.</li> <li>▪ The progress of children working below national curriculum levels is not analysed systematically.</li> <li>▪ The percentage of looked after children that have a personal education plan has declined and is too low.</li> </ul>

## 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 self-evaluation underestimates the areas for development in this outcome area. The table below sets out the evidence for the grade awarded.

<p><b>Major strengths</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Children and young people's involvement in making decisions about services is given a very strong focus by the council. Good numbers of children and young people, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, have their views represented through well established school councils and the youth</li> </ul>
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cabinet to inform reviews of services.

- All looked after children's reviews are held on time with a very high proportion contributing their views.
- Well targeted action by the council and partners has resulted in a steady decrease in numbers of young people coming into the youth justice system. An effective restorative justice scheme in children's homes helps to maintain low rates of offending amongst looked after children.

#### **Important weaknesses and areas for development**

- There are too few opportunities for some representative groups to meet together to share initiatives and concerns, and so enhance the capacity of the groups further.
- The re-offending rates of some groups of young people are increasing. Overall rates are now significantly higher than the national average.

### **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 self-evaluation underestimates the areas for development in this outcome area. The table below sets out the evidence for the grade awarded.

#### **Major strengths**

- Over the last three years the proportion of young people aged 16 to 19 who are not in education, employment or training has fallen faster than in similar council's and nationally and it is now lower than in similar councils and nationally.
- The percentage of young people achieving Level 3 qualifications is above that achieved by similar councils.
- The high quality 14 to 19 strategy provides a diverse range of curriculum opportunities, including for those in rural areas of the county.
- The percentage of care leavers living in suitable accommodation has risen from 82% to 92.3% and is now better than statistical neighbours and national averages.

#### **Important weaknesses and areas for development**

- Too few looked after children have pathway plans.
- The percentage of young people achieving Level 2 qualifications by age 19 is below that of statistical neighbours.

## Capacity to improve, including the management of children’s services

Grade 3

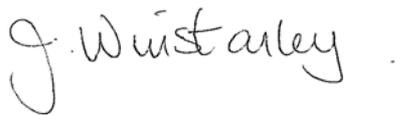
The council’s capacity to improve its services for children and young people is good and its management of these services is good. The council’s self-evaluation of the grade for this area was too optimistic and it overestimated its position. The council and its partners have a clear direction for services for children and young people which is endorsed and supported by stakeholders. Ambitions for children and young people are good. There is a clear focus on improving outcomes for all and reducing inequalities. The approach to setting priorities is good. The council and its partners have used their good understanding of local need to identify safeguarding and raising achievement as overarching priorities. The Children and Young People’s Plan and service action plans are good with clear targets and lead responsibilities stated. The resources to deliver the targets are not always explicit and there is inequitable access to services across the entire council area. There is a good track record of service improvements. Capacity has been enhanced through the use of the voluntary and community sector which provides some specialised services although a shortage of social workers has had a negative impact on some aspects of performance. Performance management is good with clear and robust performance monitoring although the wider involvement of councillors is rather limited.

<p><b>Major strengths</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Ambitions and priorities are based on a thorough and comprehensive analysis of need.</li> <li>▪ A clear focus on improving outcomes for all and reducing inequalities has resulted in it improving more performance indicators than any other English council however improvements have been variable in some key areas.</li> <li>▪ The capacity of the council to improve is demonstrated clearly by the cultural change that has occurred at all levels and across partner organisations. There is an organisation-wide understanding and commitment to the changes which have resulted in better integrated working at a local level and a good focus on preventative services.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Important weaknesses and areas for development</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The number of staff vacancies, particularly within children’s social work services has reduced the timeliness of assessments.</li> </ul>

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

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Juliet Winstanley". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Juliet Winstanley  
Divisional Manager, Local Services Inspection