

26 November 2007

Mr David Brown
Executive Director for Children's Services
Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council
Room 39, The Council House
Lichfield Street
Walsall
WS1 1TW

Dear Mr Brown

2007 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN WALSALL METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

This letter summarises the findings of the 2007 annual performance assessment (APA) for your local authority. The judgements in the letter draw on your review of the Children and Young People's Plan where it was available, and the evidence and briefings provided by Ofsted, other inspectorates and relevant bodies. 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.

Overall effectiveness of children's services

Grade 3

Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council, in partnership with Education Walsall, delivers good services for children and young people and shows sustained improvement. Some parts of the borough face significant social and economic obstacles and the council shows increasing ambition to challenge these. This ambition, together with high quality strategic leadership and innovative solutions, are improving the achievement and well-being of young people. The council is aware of the need to improve the educational attainment and life chances of young people aged between 14 and 19. Plans to achieve this through collaborative working are a significant strength.

Being healthy

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The council's contribution to outcomes in this area for children and young people is good. Partnership working is effective across the borough.

Health awareness is good in schools and there is a strong emphasis on the social, emotional and physical health of all young people. Many schools are participating successfully in the Healthy Schools initiative. There is strong focus on a whole family

approach to tackling obesity and a commitment by the council to ensure there is regular access to sport and exercise in and out of school. The health needs of children with disabilities are identified early. Multi-agency working is effective in providing good access to an integrated and responsive service and a single assessment process. Community matrons ensure parents and carers are provided with good support to enable their children to access school and leisure activities. Services work effectively together to ensure they are safe and their individual needs are met. The health needs of looked after children and young people are met effectively and performance indicators exceed national averages. Around 87% of looked after children had a health and dental assessment during the year, which is much higher than similar councils.

Teenage pregnancies have reduced at a faster rate than that nationally or of similar councils. However, there was an increase in conception rates in 2005 to above national levels. The council identified the wards where improvements were needed and targeted work is in place to reduce rates across the borough.

Progress towards developing a comprehensive Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) continues. Waiting times are significantly reduced and the timely access children and young people have to treatment for substance misuse is better than in similar councils. However, progress towards ensuring the CAMHS service meets the needs of adolescents is slow. This remains a priority for improvement.

The council has identified the need to improve breast-feeding initiation rates and reduce the number of women smoking during pregnancy. Targeted action is now in place, for example, school nurses and community health advisers provide good advice and support in a range of settings.

Area(s) for development

- Improve the health education of pregnant women.
- Ensure the CAMHS service meets the needs of adolescents.

Staying safe

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The council makes a good contribution to promoting and ensuring the safety of children and young people, and services are effective and efficient. All services work well together. Good progress has been made on implementing the common assessment framework.

The council has effectively improved the management of the child protection register. This was identified as an area for improvement in the APA of 2006 but is now a strength. There has been an increase in core assessments completed within

35 working days from 76% to 84%. This is better than similar authorities and national averages. Over a three year period repeat referrals have reduced to 12.6% which is significantly lower than similar authorities and nationally. All children on the child protection register are allocated a social worker. Every child protection case is reviewed within the timescale, re-registrations have reduced and are now lower than in both similar authorities and national levels. However, there has been a decline in the number of initial assessments completed within seven days from 62.4% to 57.7%. Robust action has been taken to address this and monitoring by the Local Safeguarding Children Board shows that from April to June 2007 90% of initial assessments were completed on time. The percentage of children who were placed for adoption is very good and has improved to 10.9%. This is better than similar councils.

In Walsall 21% of the children are from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds. However, the proportion of children subject to a child protection plan or on the child protection register from minority ethnic groups is lower. This is a key area for action and is being monitored through the Local Safeguarding Children Board. Services have been refocused to ensure that Children's Centres, schools and extended settings meet and represent the needs of all communities. As a result, in 2006–7 the number of children from Asian heritage backgrounds who are on the child protection register or subject to a child protection plan has increased.

Domestic violence was identified as an area of significant concern by the Local Safeguarding Children Board. A tiered response to referrals was agreed. Two social work teams have merged to maximise capacity and new protocols and procedures agreed with the police. Strong partnerships have been established with the local community, in particular with regard to providing confidential advice and guidance to those young people at risk of exploitation. A comprehensive good practice guide, clearly outlining acceptable corrective behaviour, has been developed in collaboration with local Madressahs and circulated throughout the local community.

Area(s) for development

- Complete all initial assessments within agreed timescales.
- Ensure effective safeguarding of all children and young people, especially minority ethnic groups.

Enjoying and achieving

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. This is because there is a strong trend of improvement relating to the standards achieved at ages 7, 11 and 14. The standard of provision in early years settings continues to rise and is good. Children start early years settings with

lower than expected levels of attainment in many parts of the borough but rigorous monitoring of standards has led to improved standards of attainment and the quality of the settings. This is leading to good progress being made in early years settings. The proportion of settings judged good or outstanding is rising and is better than national levels.

Upward trends continue at Key Stages 1 and 2 at a rate better than most other local authorities. This means that 7 and 11 year olds now reach average standards overall and they make good progress. This is in marked contrast to the local authority inspection of 2004 when standards were judged to require improvement at all key stages. The strong focus on improving literacy skills is starting to bear fruit, particularly in helping children from minority ethnic heritage backgrounds to attain well. Standards reached at age 11 for example, are now close to or slightly above national averages. This represents a level of progress that is well above both similar councils and national levels. Additionally, the targeting of support and challenge to schools is effective. For example, the authority has a 'zero tolerance' policy towards schools setting targets at or below the floor target of 65% Level 4 at age 11 which is improving outcomes.

This success in primary schools is echoed in Key Stage 3 where there has also been significant improvement and standards are now in line with national levels. This represents good progress although there are some variations in performance across the borough.

The overall improving picture is starting to impact on outcomes at Key Stage 4 and beyond although some aspects require further improvement. The proportion of children and young people who achieved at least 5 A* to C GCSE grades improved in 2006 by 5% on the previous year to around 51% and is close to comparable authorities but is below national levels. The performance of young people who achieve 5 A* to C GCSE results which include mathematics and English remained around 35% in 2006. Although in line with similar councils this is below the national average. This is largely as a consequence of the low attainment of those from Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage backgrounds, low income White heritage boys, and looked after children and young people. The number of young people who leave school with no qualification remains high although this too was reduced in 2006.

The authority is aware of these priorities and has responded with rigour. There has been a restructuring of the team leading on 14–19 improvements, which has secured a high level of engagement from schools and other partners in a short period of time, and who have produced a high quality and ambitious plan to improve attainment. Strong partnership and joint planning led to improvements in 5 A*- C GCSE results in 2006 and the authority exceeded the targets agreed with the Department for Children, Schools and Families for young people age 16 in 2007.

Information from surveys of young people show that they enjoy school. Attendance rates are broadly in line with national averages. Exclusions remain very low compared to similar councils and there is a good level of support available for those children and young people who are excluded.

School improvement strategies are innovative and effective. Good practice is increasingly shared and developed across the borough. This has led to a growing number of schools judged good or outstanding by inspectors. Schools that are judged to require improvement improve rapidly and in 2006 the proportion of schools causing concern was below national levels, especially in the secondary school sector.

Area(s) for development

- Improve the performance of young people at GCSE level.
- Improve the attainment of young people in Key Stage 4 who are at risk of underachievement, including minority ethnic children and young people, boys and looked after children.

Making a positive contribution

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to outcomes in this area is good. Consultation with children and young people is strong. In the last year, their contributions have informed decision-making and are beginning to shape service delivery, activities and programmes. Consultation with looked after children, vulnerable, and hard-to-reach groups, such as excluded children and young people is also good. Ninety five percent of looked after children participated in their reviews; this is higher than in similar authorities. Children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have good support and over 90% had transition plans. Young carers are supported well to access a range of activities with their peers through respite services. In addition, their achievements and successes are celebrated regularly within the borough. School and youth councils and advocacy enable these children and young people to contribute their views. An increasing proportion of children and young people aged 13–19 are reached by publicly funded youth services (37.1%). This is above the national target of 25% and the national average of 27.6%.

Peer mentoring is used effectively especially to reduce drug and alcohol misuse and to support care leavers. Strategies such as summer holiday programmes for vulnerable children and young people have helped to bring about a reduction in anti-social behaviour. The performance of the youth offending service is not consistent. The service has been effective in reducing re-offending rates, which are now in line with similar authorities and nationally. Re-offending rates of looked after children and young people are also reducing, although they remain above those for similar councils. However, the numbers of young people remanded to custody has increased and there has been a decline in the proportion of those who offend who take part in any education, employment and training. Rigorous action is being taken to address this issue. Quarterly performance meetings of the youth offending service are in place with a focus on responsibility for accounting for performance. Responsibility for

the service is now with children's services and is incorporated into their management and delivery targets.

Area(s) for development

- Improve the performance of the youth offending service.
- Reduce the proportion of offenders who are not in education, employment and/or training.

Achieving economic well-being

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate. Key strengths include the quality of the planning to increase vocational and work based training available to young people and collaborative working across services to improve opportunities for school and care leavers. Effective and ambitious links are also forged with local regeneration projects. For example, the authority is encouraging high technology businesses in areas of the borough where aspirations towards skilled work are traditionally low.

The authority has successfully increased the proportion of young people achieving level 1 qualifications and apprenticeships. However, the proportion of young people achieving Level 2 and 3 vocational qualifications requires improvement. The council has secured appropriate joint timetabling across providers which starts in autumn 2007 and as a result the curriculum for young people aged between 16 and 19 is developing well. School inspections show that economic well-being is usually judged satisfactory or good and is outstanding in a quarter of secondary schools inspected. The average points score per student at GCE and AS or A level has improved significantly since 2005 and is now above that of similar councils but below national levels. Although numbers are rising, too few young people go on to further or higher education.

Increasing the opportunities available for vocational education was an area to develop in the APA of 2006 but these are now developing well. For example, the increase in the number of apprenticeships available was the highest nationally in 2006. Schools and other partners have engaged in collaborative partnerships to dovetail their curriculum and timetables to ensure a more coherent approach regarding diplomas and other vocational options. One diploma will be in place in 2008; a second will commence in 2009; and there are advanced plans for more. The authority has also given careful consideration to travel planning to ensure that young people are able to access the increasing opportunities. Similarly the availability of child care places has improved enabling more parents to return to work.

Support to vulnerable young people has also improved considerably. For example, the help available to those leaving care at age 19 to ensure they enter employment

or education is good. Young people are consulted well in plans for their future, both individually as part of good careers guidance and mentoring, and via surveys. An innovative approach to increasing economic awareness in school age children and young people using competitions in collaboration with the Education Business Partnership and the planned delivery of a 'virtual school', for those in care are evidence of good contributions across the service. Although reduced significantly in the last year and below similar councils, the number of young people who are not engaged in education, training and employment remains high at 9% compared to 7.7% nationally. However, the proportion of young people who are at risk of not entering employment, education or training has reduced significantly since 2005 especially for some ethnic heritage groups.

Area(s) for development

- Ensure the collaborative timetables help to improve the attainment of young people aged between 16 and 19, especially at Level 2 and 3 qualifications.
- Reduce the proportion of young people not engaged in education, employment or training.
- Increase the proportion of young people who stay in education post 16.

Capacity to improve, including the management of children's services

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The council has demonstrated a good capacity to improve services. Significant progress has been made in improving areas that were highlighted as requiring improvement in 2006 showing good progress overall. Indeed some of these aspects, including the management of the child protection register and genuine ambition in target setting, are now strengths. The key driver behind this improvement is high quality strategic leadership and the effective joint working between the council and key strategic partners, including Education Walsall. The joint working and delivery of services has led to detailed and effective planning processes, exemplified by the successful management of key functions such as financial planning, core contract negotiations and the phased reduction of surplus places in schools. The quality of the support services for school improvement remains good. Strategic planning for future delivery is a key strength.

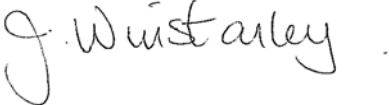
The council has an accurate view of its relative strengths and weaknesses and shows a proactive and responsive approach to improvement. It is aware, for example, that the areas for development remain very similar to last year in one aspect, enjoying and achieving, and this is a key priority. Levels of investment in core services are high but the council has also managed to reduce costs in some sectors whilst improving outcomes. This achievement is recognised as exceptional by the Audit Commission. The council provides good value for money.

Area(s) for development

- Ensure the monitoring of the plans to improve attainment maintain tight ambition and timescales.

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.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Juliet Winstanley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'J' and a period at the end.

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager
Local Services Inspection