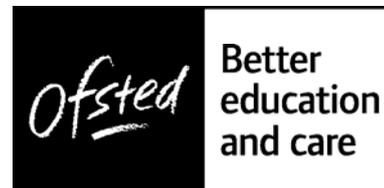


Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London WC2B 6SE

T 08456 404045
Email edhelpline@ofsted.gov.uk



Making Social Care
Better for People



Ms Rosalind Turner
Director for Children and Young People
Suffolk County Council
Endeavour House
Ipswich IP1 2BX

1 December 2005

Dear Ms Turner

ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SUFFOLK COUNTY COUNCIL'S EDUCATION AND CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE SERVICES 2005

This letter summarises the findings of the meeting held on 4 July 2005 to assess the performance of the education and social care services within your authority. We are grateful for the information which you provided to support this process and for the time made available by yourself and your colleagues to discuss relevant issues.

Being healthy

Outcomes in this area are mostly good. Initiatives have been well focused; for example, the 'healthy schools' programme, breakfast clubs and school-based health services have been located in the areas of the greatest need. A three-year strategy focuses on the needs of vulnerable groups such as care leavers, young offenders and excluded pupils. Sport and fitness are well promoted by the schools and the youth service. Good partnership with health professionals has contributed to consistently strong, above-average performance on the health and well-being of looked-after children. The Authority has a convincing strategy for the reduction of teenage pregnancies and is on track to meet its interim target to reduce them by 15%. The conception rate for under-18s has been consistently below national and regional averages. Teenage pregnancy rates are falling.

Necessary improvements in access to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) have been identified and a strategic response prepared: the Authority intends to promote earlier intervention, to involve social workers more and to reduce waiting list times through a triage system. Clear timescales for this work have yet to be formulated, although the proposal has been agreed in principle. The Primary Care Trust has established a 'waiting list initiative' for children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in Ipswich funded by the CAMHS grant with the aim of reducing waiting times to six months.

Staying safe

The Authority has continued its good performance of the previous year and outcomes in this area of its work are generally good.

Looked after children are generally served well. All are allocated to a social worker even those placed outside of Suffolk. The number of children who were referred to the Authority as children in need has increased over the past year, but is in line with the regional average. Despite this rise the percentage of core assessments undertaken within 35 days has improved. The Authority has been successful over the past year in its strategy to reduce the number of children who were referred to the Authority, from 1 April 2004 to 31 March 2005, within 12 months of a previous referral. This has reduced from 30.4% to 18.3% over the past two years, and is below the regional average. This strategy, in part, included improved working with partner agencies. The Authority has also worked with partners in developing targets for the Local Area Agreement, for which Suffolk has been a pilot. A shadow Children and Young People's Plan has also been developed by the Authority with partner agencies. This is a good development.

The outcomes for children who have been looked after for four or more years continue to require improvement. The Authority intends to look at this cohort over the coming year with a view to improving performance in this area.

Although the outcomes for children on the child protection register are currently good, the upward trend of numbers of children on the register and re-registration rates need careful monitoring to ensure the positive profile continues. The number of children on the child protection register has increased over the past year, as has the percentage of re-registrations. The Authority has adopted the good practice of using family support workers, under the direct supervision of qualified social workers, to undertake elements of work to support these children. The Authority recognises the impact of the changes in legislation on child protection referrals as well as the possible links between drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence and mental health issues, and child protection work. There are plans to progress this area of work over the coming year. The Authority has in place a successful strategy to reduce the number of children on the register for over two years.

The Authority has made good progress in modernising its safeguarding arrangements, especially through the structure and appointment to new posts, for example three professional advisors, nine planning and reviewing managers and six safeguarding managers.

The Authority has not consistently delivered good quality care within two of its in house residential services particularly in relation to incidents of bullying, and staffs' ability to keep children safe. The Authority has closed one of these services and has an action plan in place for the other. It also has in place a five-year 'modernisation programme' for its residential services. The Authority is aiming, over the coming year, to move towards a multi agency way of working that will link to a range of other initiatives. This is a positive step. For looked after children the aim is to commission placements within the County.

The Authority achieves a good performance in managing the weekly unit cost of residential and fostering care however it has failed to provide an adequate number of foster placements for minority ethnic children. The Authority has had a contract in place with an independent sector provider for the last year to recruit fourteen black and minority ethnic foster carers. This has resulted in two black and minority ethnic carers being recruited.

There has been an improvement in the performance of the Authority in the timescales for adoption following the decision in the best interests of the child.

Enjoying and achieving

Overall, educational attainment is good. At GCSE, the proportion of pupils achieving five or more A*-C grades is consistently in line with that of the top quarter of local authorities. Only one school, the lowest proportion in the region, fell below the national threshold of 25%. Comparatively few schools are in special measures or have serious weaknesses. The attainment of looked-after children is good. The proportion of Black Caribbean and Bangladeshi pupils gaining five or more passes at GCSE grades A-C is above national figures. Other indicators at Key Stages 1, 3 and GCSE are always at least in line with, and sometimes above those of statistical neighbours. In comparison, outcomes at Key Stage 2 are poor, particularly in middle schools. This issue is being tackled by means of a well-developed strategy, focusing on first and middle schools, which provides data to schools to help them develop challenging targets for pupils.

A similarly targeted approach is taken to improving attendance and to reducing exclusions in schools where there are particular concerns. Those institutions with a high level of absence compared with similar schools have been involved in a project with the DfES which has resulted in improvements greater than those of other participating authorities. The Authority reports that its cross-service approach to exclusions has reduced them by 24% in the last school year. In spite of these initiatives, the authority is aware that the rates of permanent exclusion in some primary schools and unauthorised absence in secondary schools remain too high. In the latter case, it has been, to some extent, a victim of its own success in encouraging more accurate reporting of absence.

The progress that pupils make as they move through school is satisfactory. The value added between Key Stages 2 and 4, and Key Stages 3 and 4 is in line with that of statistical neighbours, but progress is insufficient in one third of school sixth forms. In over four out of every five schools, inspections have found that pupils' attitudes, extra-curricular opportunities and support for learning are good or very good.

Standards of childcare are in line with those nationally. The provision of registered children's services for under-8s is expanding very rapidly. There has been an increase in full-day care and a corresponding decrease in sessional provision. Target times for the registration of providers are, however, not being met. The proportion of nursery education centres rated very good or excellent is below the national average, reflecting a similar picture in the overall effectiveness of schools.

Making a positive contribution

Outcomes in this area are good and the Authority has a wide range of forums to ensure that the views of children and young people about the services they receive are taken into account and acted on. These include children's meetings in residential services and school councils to a young people's steering group. The aim is for all partner agencies, through the Authority's Participation Strategy, to have in place a strategy for engaging children and young people.

There are good examples of ways in which young people have made contributions to service development. These include their involvement in planning of a new looked after children team, developing questionnaires for young people about the services they receive, and delivering a conference to Councillors, managers, practitioners and other young people.

The Authority has maintained its good performance in the percentage of children looked after who communicated their view at a statutory review; for the period 1 April 2004 to 31 March this was 89%.

The Authority has a rising number of referrals to the Youth Offending Service, particularly of more serious offences. This is in part, due to the high detection rate in the county. The 2004 inspection of the Youth Offending Service found the county to have in place a well structured pilot Youth Inclusion Support Programme to reduce the risk of offending. Good multi-agency approaches were also reported as a finding of the inspection. The overall assessment of the Youth Offending Service at this inspection was that the service was satisfactory with a good basis for development.

Re-offending rates in the county have risen, particularly in the higher tariff sentencing options. The Authority has identified that these young people are more likely to have complex needs. It has put in place, with partner agencies, a number of appropriate initiatives aimed at improving performance to reduce offending and re-offending rates. These include mentoring, and work with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service and Connexions. The ratio of looked after children who have received a conviction or final warning has remained relatively stable, with an acceptable performance.

Achieving economic well-being

Overall outcomes for 14-19 year olds are satisfactory, in spite of the underachievement in a third of school sixth forms. Attainment in sixth forms at AS/A levels and in the advanced vocational certificate of education (AVCE) has risen over the last four years but remains below that of statistical neighbours. Overall success rates in colleges are improving and are slightly above the national average, with the exception of Level 3 which was six per cent below. There is insufficient provision at Levels 1 and 2, and for work-based learning. Competition between school sixth forms in some parts of the county militates against effective and balanced provision. The authority recognises these issues and has created, in close partnership with the Learning and Skills Council and Connexions, a well-conceived 14-19 development plan to improve progression and the balance and coherence of the curriculum for this age group.

Provision for, and the attainment of, looked-after children are good. The percentage of care leavers in employment and training at age 19 is above the national average and above the level of statistical neighbours. The authority is working to improve the transition arrangements for children and young people with disabilities or special educational needs. Only 55% of these Year 9 pupils have a transitional review, against a regional average of 80 per cent.

SUMMARY

Strengths	Areas for improvement
<p><i>Being healthy:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • promoting healthy lifestyles through the range of initiatives offered in schools • the percentage of children looked after who have an annual medical and dental check. 	<p><i>Being healthy:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • access to child and adolescent mental health services.

<p><i>Staying safe:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • allocation of qualified social workers to looked after children and those on the child protection register • work with partners to support new initiatives such as the Local Area Agreement as well as reducing the number of children re-referred to the Authority. 	<p><i>Staying safe:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • work across children’s services and services to adults to better protect children, for example where domestic violence may be a concern • provision of in house residential services • long term placement stability.
<p><i>Enjoying and achieving:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • good overall attainment • looked-after children achieve well • well-focused strategies to improve attendance and reduce exclusion. 	<p><i>Enjoying and achieving:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • relatively weak attainment at KS2 • unauthorised absence and exclusions too high in some schools • variation in the quality of childcare for those under eight.
<p><i>Making a positive contribution:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • range of forums available for children and young people to express their views. 	<p><i>Making a positive contribution:</i></p>
<p><i>Achieving economic well-being:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provision for looked-after children • improving success rates in colleges. 	<p><i>Achieving economic well-being:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • providing an appropriate curriculum for all post-16 students • insufficient progress in one third of school sixth forms.

Service management

The council, as part of the Annual Performance Assessment process, completed a comprehensive self-assessment that indicated it knows itself well. The authority has progressed this further by engaging partner agencies in the process of self-assessment. The aim is for this to inform shared targets and priorities across all partners, including within the Children and Young People’s Plan. The authority has used data well to inform priorities and targets. Its areas for development in 2005/6 are well chosen, being based on a very accurate assessment of strengths and weaknesses. It is clear about the importance of sharing targets and performance data across the organisation and reflecting these in objectives for individual staff. It has excellent capacity to further improve its services to children and young people.

Within this strong overall picture, there are occasional areas for improvement. The authority's accurate analysis and well-chosen priorities are sometimes compromised at the operational level by vague targets or weak monitoring. Expected outcomes are not identified with sufficient clarity, with the result that the self-assessment does not indicate the impact of programmes. The recent attempt to recruit black and minority foster carers had clear targets, but fell behind schedule.

The Authority has developed strong and productive working relationships with a range of partners. It has set out a number of ambitious plans setting out its strategic priorities, for example the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership Board, and the Children's Futures Programme. Its community strategy has established, via consultation, priorities in the areas of citizenship, health and well-being, the environment, lifelong learning and the economy. The Local Area Agreement was derived from this strategy, and incorporates a programme of engagement by young people and the parents and carers. It has thus provided strong leadership by demonstrating, in its intentions, a high level of ambition.

The budget for children and families has seen a positive year-on-year growth, with a 4.7 per cent increase in 2004/05, which followed an 11% increase in 2003/04. The authority's accurate analysis and planning ensures that the money is well used.

The Authority has experienced some difficulty in recruiting to social worker posts, within services to both adults and children. However, it has developed suitable strategies to address the shortfall; some recruitment has taken place overseas, and, in the current year, 11 staff have been supported to qualify as social workers.

Areas for exploration in the joint area review

Being healthy

Action is taken to promote children and young people's mental health:

- access to children and adolescent mental health services.

Staying safe

The incidence of child abuse and neglect is minimised:

- child protection.

Agencies collaborate to safeguard children according to the requirements of current government guidance:

- review of Family Support.

Children and young people are provided with a safe environment:

- long term placement stability.

Enjoying and achieving

Children and young people are enabled and encouraged to attend and enjoy school and to achieve highly:

- attainment at Key Stage 2
- the level of exclusions and unauthorised absence in some schools
- variation in the quality of childcare for those under eight.

Making a positive contribution

Action is taken to prevent offending and to reduce re-offending by children and young people:

- offending and re-offending rates.

Achieving economic well-being

Action is taken to ensure that 14-19 education and training is planned and delivered in a co-ordinated way, and to ensure that education and training 14-19 is of good quality:

- the achievement of and provision for learners in school sixth forms.

Final judgements

Please see your final annual performance assessment judgements attached at the end of this letter.

Yours sincerely



FLO HADLEY
Divisional Manager
Office for Standards in Education



JONATHAN PHILLIPS
Director – Quality, Performance and Methods
Commission for Social Care Inspection

APA final judgements 2005: Suffolk County Council

Areas for judgement	Final judgements ¹
The contribution of <i>the local authority's social care services</i> in maintaining and improving outcomes for children and young people	3
The contribution of <i>local authority's education services</i> in maintaining and improving outcomes for children and young people.	3
The contribution of <i>the local authority's children's services</i> in maintaining and improving outcomes for children and young people.	3
The council's overall capacity to improve its services for children and young people	4

1

Grade	Service descriptors	Capacity to improve descriptors
4	A service that delivers well above minimum requirements for users	Very good
3	A service that consistently delivers above minimum requirements for users	Good/promising
2	A service that delivers only minimum requirements for users	Adequate
1	A service that does not deliver minimum requirements for users	Inadequate