

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London WC2B 6SE

T 08456 40 40 40
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 0115 944 9193
Direct F 0115 944 9307
Midlands_apa@ofsted.gov.uk



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Mr Ged Rowney
Director of Children's and Young People's Services
Stoke-on-Trent City Council
Floor 2 Civic Centre
Glebe Street
Stoke-on-Trent
ST4 1HH

Dear Mr Rowney

Annual performance assessment of services for children and young people in Stoke-on-Trent City 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.

Assessment judgement area	APA grade
Overall effectiveness of children's services	2
Being healthy	2
Staying safe	2
Enjoying and achieving	2
Making a positive contribution	3
Achieving economic well-being	2
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 2

Stoke-on-Trent City Council, in partnership with Serco Ltd, delivers services for children and young people that meet the minimum requirements for service users. The council’s capacity to improve, including its management of services is good. Its ambitions and priorities are clearly set out and shared with partners. Additionally, its strong leadership is focused on improving the lives of children and young people, including those who are most vulnerable.

The council has made concerted efforts to tackle the long standing issues in the first JAR and development points identified in the APA of 2007 and there is evidence of improvement in a number of key areas. In 2007, staying safe was judged to be inadequate but, as a result of rapid progress across a range of performance measures, it is now adequate. There is a clear focus on further improvement. There have been sustained improvements in the standards reached by children and young people at the end of Key Stage 2 and at GCSE and the number of schools in a category of concern is reducing. The proportion of Year 11 young people staying on in education has increased and is above that of similar councils. There are good opportunities for children and young people to have their views heard and to make a positive contribution.

However, despite such progress, outcomes remain below average in a number of respects. Teenage pregnancies remain the second highest when compared to similar councils. The standards reached by children and young people at the end of Key Stage 1 and 3 have declined and the trend of improvement for young people achieving five A* to C GCSE grades including English and mathematics at Key Stage 4 is not fast enough when compared to similar councils and is well below the national average. The percentage of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), while falling, is still higher than similar councils for a number of vulnerable groups. Joint commissioning and financial management is underdeveloped.

Being healthy

Grade 2

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate. The council’s analysis of its strengths and areas for development in this outcome area underestimates a number of important weaknesses and overvalues the areas where progress has been made. The table below sets out the evidence for the grade awarded.

Major strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The rate at which schools are achieving Healthy School status is good and the council is well on track to meet its target for December 2008. ▪ Universal services at tier one and two of child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) are good, with waiting times continuing to be better than average for a fourth year. Referrals to more specialist services are generally

seen within four weeks of referral which is good and compares well against the national target of 13 weeks.

- Looked after children health checks are better than the national average.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- Infant mortality rates are significantly higher than national averages.
- Despite considerable effort, through initiatives such as the SABLE project, the proportion of mothers initiating breast-feeding is lower than that nationally.
- Whilst the latest data show there has been a slight reduction in the rate of teenage conceptions, it remains the second highest in the group of similar councils. The 3.6% reduction in teenage conceptions, compared to the 1998 baseline, falls short of national targets.
- There is slow progress in implementing comprehensive CAMHS.

Staying safe

Grade 2

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate. The council's analysis of its strengths and areas for development in this outcome area underestimate a number of important weaknesses and overvalue the areas where progress has been made. The table below sets out the evidence for the grade awarded.

Major strengths

- The reduction in children and young people killed in road traffic accidents is significantly better than the national average.
- All children with a child protection plan have been allocated a qualified social worker and their cases are reviewed on time.
- There has been a significant increase in the number of core assessments which brings Stoke more in line with similar councils.
- The number of adoptions within 12 months of the adoption decision being made has improved and is higher than the averages nationally and of similar councils.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- Referrals up until the end of March 2008 are the highest in the group of similar councils and second highest nationally. The council has recently reorganised its duty system to tackle this issue.
- The Local Safeguarding Children Board has yet to embrace its wider safeguarding responsibilities.
- The timeliness of reviews of looked after children has improved but remains the lowest in the group of similar councils and seventh lowest nationally.
- The long term placement stability of looked after children has improved but remains lower than similar councils and the national average.

Enjoying and achieving

Grade 2

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate. The council's analysis of its strengths and areas for development in this outcome area underestimate a number of important weaknesses and overvalue the areas where progress has been made. The table below sets out the evidence for the grade awarded.

<p>Major strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provision is good in early years and inspections show that seven nursery schools have been judged outstanding. ▪ There is good provision in pupil referral units and special schools. ▪ 'The rate of improvement at Key Stage 2 is faster than the average found nationally and in similar councils.' ▪ The number of schools in a category of concern has reduced with no secondary schools currently in a category. ▪ Fixed term exclusions in secondary schools have declined since 2005 and in 2007 were lower than the average nationally and for similar councils.
<p>Important weaknesses and areas for development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Attainment at Key Stage 1 has declined over two years to below that of similar councils and is well below the national average. At Key Stage 3, it declined in 2007 so that the percentage of children and young people obtaining Level 5 and above was below similar councils in English, mathematics and science. ▪ Although improving, the increase in the percentage of young people obtaining 5 A* -C GCSE grades, including English and mathematics, has not been fast enough when compared to similar councils and so remains well below.' ▪ Too few secondary schools ensure children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make good progress. ▪ The trend of improvement for the educational attainment of looked after children is not yet consistent enough.

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 analysis of its strengths and areas for development in this outcome area underestimate a number of important weaknesses and overvalue the areas where progress has been made. The table below sets out the evidence for the grade awarded.

<p>Major strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Children and young people in Stoke believe that the council listens to their views. ▪ There is a downward trend in the number of first time entrants into the youth justice system and performance is better than that of similar councils. ▪ The youth offending team has developed strong partnership arrangements with the school clusters to engage young people at risk of offending or anti-social behaviour. ▪ The council demonstrates a strong focus on listening to the views of looked after children. ▪ The corporate parenting panel is challenging in its approach and scrutiny arrangements are rigorous. ▪ The council is pro-active in finding ways of ensuring children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are consulted and have opportunities for making decisions about their own lives.
<p>Important weaknesses and areas for development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The proportion of young people reached by youth services is lower than last year and below the national target and the national average. ▪ The proportion of looked after children participating in their reviews remains significantly below similar councils. ▪ There is insufficient placement choice for looked after children from a black or minority ethnic background.

Achieving economic well-being

Grade 2

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate. The council's analysis of its strengths and areas for development in this outcome area underestimate a number of important weaknesses and overvalue the areas where progress has been made. The table below sets out the evidence for the grade awarded.

<p>Major strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ There is a coherent 14–19 strategy and a good range of vocational opportunities available to young people. Strong collaboration between partners has led to success in securing delivery of the new diplomas. ▪ The proportion of Year 11 young people staying on in education has increased over the last three years and is above the average for similar councils. ▪ Participation in work-based learning by 17-year-olds is above the national average. ▪ The proportion of young people completing apprenticeships is higher than in similar councils and above the national average.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- The percentage of young people NEET is declining, especially for males. However, it is still higher than the average nationally and for similar councils, particularly for looked after children, those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, White British, White and Black Caribbean and Pakistan heritage groups and teenage mothers.
- Participation for young people aged 17 in education, employment and training has risen but remains below the national average.
- Despite improvements in the proportion of young people aged 19 with qualifications at Level 2 and 3, figures remain below those for similar councils and the national average.
- The proportion of care leavers with pathway plans is below the averages nationally and for similar councils.

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 also good. This finding supports both the council's self assessment and the findings of the very recent JAR.

From April 2007, Stoke-on-Trent Children's Services have had support and intervention, from Serco Ltd. Recent rapid progress has been made across the majority of key priority areas resulting in improved overall performance which is towards that of similar councils.

The local strategic partnership has a clear focus on narrowing the gap between the most vulnerable young people and others. The council's ambitions are well reflected in the children and young people's plan and they are well understood and supported at all levels. The council uses a robust approach to manage its priority improvement programme which focuses upon the critical areas for development identified in the 2007 APA letter. It considers performance information regularly and uses benchmarking information effectively to help it manage and improve service provision. There is a track record of taking difficult decisions such as the restructuring of children's social care and the reorganisation of schools.

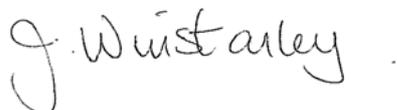
The council's capacity to improve is good. The very positive leadership offered by the senior management team from Serco Ltd has been recognised by staff, schools and other partners. Although improvements in outcomes have been achieved in targeted services, there is still further work to be done in relation to universal provision, particularly in the area of enjoying and achieving. However, the structures and systems are in place to tackle these issues and there is a clear pathway to achieving further improvement. Workforce planning is established in the council. Strategies to overcome staff shortages in social care are having a positive effect although vacancies remain higher than those of similar councils.

Major strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Elected members and managers provide effective leadership.▪ There has been rapid progress in several areas over the last two years.▪ The council has strong arrangements for performance management.▪ The council's priorities are underpinned by a good analysis of needs.▪ The development of multi-agency neighbourhood working is enabling ambitions to be realised and priorities delivered in a local context.
Important weaknesses and areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Joint commissioning is slow to be developed and is not sufficiently strategic.▪ Financial management is underutilised as a tool for driving improvement.

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".

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager
Local Services Inspection