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Mrs Anne Plummer
Acting Corporate Director, Education and Children's Services
Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council
PO Box 20
Council House
Solihull
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Dear Mrs Plummer

Annual performance assessment of services for children and young people in Solihull Metropolitan Borough 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	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

Solihull Council provides services that consistently deliver above minimum requirements for most users. The management of children’s service is good and the council’s capacity to improve is good. The council has sustained continued high standards that are above average for most children and young people whose achievement ranks as some of the best nationally. The council is making generally good progress in responding to the recommendations of the JAR published in March 2008 and the APA in 2007. For example, effective strategies have been implemented to ensure that children and young people feel safe from bullying and improvements in provision have considerably reduced the proportion of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). However, in some areas insufficient progress has been made. For example, the proportion of schools achieving healthy school status is still too low as is the proportion of mothers who breast-feed. Making a positive contribution which was judged as outstanding in the APA in 2007 is now judged as good. Despite some recent improvements the JAR identified that the strategic approach to corporate parenting was too narrow and the proportion of young people who are reached by publicly-funded youth services was below average. Overall the strong leadership of the council, combined with effective partnerships, has accurately identified six key priorities which are successfully driving improvements in services for children and young people. This is beginning to narrow the gap for vulnerable groups.

Being healthy

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>Major strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Comprehensive child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) are being delivered with no long waits. These services are highly valued at the point of access by parents of, for example, children with attention deficit hyperactive disorder. ▪ Health outcomes for looked after children and young people are good and better than statistical neighbours because their needs are addressed well. ▪ Children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are well supported through effective multi-disciplinary work.
<p>Important weaknesses and areas for development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The proportion of schools who have achieved Healthy School Status remains too low. ▪ The proportion of mothers who are breast-feeding continues to be too low.

Staying safe

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>Major strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Children and young people are provided with a safe environment in Solihull through effective multi-agency preventative action. ▪ The child protection service is good, with all cases allocated to a qualified social worker and all reviews of child protection plans carried out within statutory timescales. Cases are well managed and only a few children remain the subject of child protection plans beyond two years. ▪ There are extensive, high quality and well-resourced preventative services to families to prevent family breakdown. This has contributed to a below average proportion of children in the local population becoming looked after by the council.
<p>Important weaknesses and areas for development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The proportion of reviews for looked after children completed on time remains too low. ▪ The number of re-referrals of children in need back to social care services is too high.

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>Major strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Overall, standards continue to be high at Key Stages 1, 2 and 4 compared with national levels. ▪ The proportion of children in Foundation Stage who achieve national expectations continues to rise and is now well above average. ▪ The school attendance of looked after children is well above average and this group have had no permanent exclusions during the year.
<p>Important weaknesses and areas for development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The achievement gap for children and young people between the north of Solihull and the rest of the council is reducing, but remains too wide at Key Stages 1, 3 and 4.

- Standards of attainment at Key Stage 3 are in line with the national average; however, they have not risen in English and mathematics since 2005.

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 is accurate but insufficient weight has been given to some important weaknesses. The table below sets out the evidence for the grade awarded.

Major strengths

- The involvement and consultation with children and young people including the most vulnerable groups is good. Children continue to play an extremely important role in shaping many services. For example, children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have campaigned successfully for improvements to four playgrounds.
- Good arrangements have increased opportunities for the unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people to contribute to the wider community and to influence decision-making.
- In response to the concerns of children and young people reported in the APA letter in 2007 there is an effective multi-agency anti-bullying strategy in place. Racist incidents in schools are very rare and effectively dealt with.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- The proportion of young people who are reached by publicly-funded youth services fell considerably in 2007, but by March 2008 had risen so that proportions were similar to those of 2006. This proportion fell far short of the national average.
- The recent JAR identified a lack of strategic overview to broaden corporate parenting and set challenging targets for looked after children. The council has produced an action plan but it is too early to evaluate the impact of this plan in improving outcomes for these children.

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 analysis of its strengths and areas for development for this outcome area is consistent with the evidence.

Major strengths

- New schools and college provision in the north of Solihull have contributed to reducing significantly the proportion of young people who are NEET.
- The percentage of young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities who

are NEET has reduced considerably and is now lower than the national average.

- Strong partnerships have led to good progress towards the delivery of new 14–19 vocational diplomas, with information technology approved for September 2008 and a further four vocational areas planned for 2009.
- The average point score of 16- to 18-year-olds is rising at a considerably faster rate than that of statistical neighbours and the national average.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- The percentage of teenage parents who are in education, employment or training remains too low.

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 continues to provide effective leadership for children’s services. Ambitions for children and young people are good. The children and young people’s plan demonstrates that the council has made an accurate analysis of need which has led to the identification of six clear priorities. This has ensured that there is a well planned strategy for improvement shared by all partners. Progress in their 2007 review has been rigorously evaluated to ensure that the correct action is being taken for services to achieve their targets. An example of this is the transformation of the north of Solihull and the regeneration of services for children and young people which is beginning to bear fruit. The achievement gap at Key Stage 2 has narrowed and standards in the north of Solihull are now average. The proportion of young people who are NEET has dropped considerably. Good partnerships at the operational level and joint commissioning have allowed the specific needs of vulnerable groups to be met successfully, for example the multi-agency support for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Performance management is adequate, but some targets are not as sharply focussed as they could be. The JAR reports that there are some inconsistencies in monitoring and benchmarking. For example, the council’s limited use of SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound) targets make it difficult for it and its partners to be certain it is achieving its priorities.

Major strengths

- Solihull demonstrates that its ambitions for children and young people are good. This is supported by a good analysis of need at a strategic level. Clear priorities are set which successfully steer the work of all partners.
- The council and its partners demonstrate effective working practices leading to improved outcomes for children and young people.

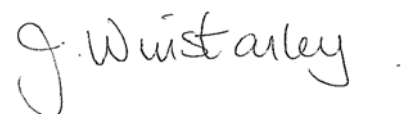
Important weaknesses and areas for development

- Performance management is not sufficiently focussed on some priorities for 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". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager, Local Services Inspection