

26 November 2007

Mr Bryn Marsh
Strategic Director of Children's Services
Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council
Merton House
Stanley Road
Bootle
Merseyside
L20 3JA

Dear Mr Marsh

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

This letter summarises the findings of the 2007 annual performance assessment for your local authority. The judgements in the letter draw on the Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP), your action plan arising from the joint area review (JAR) and the evidence and briefings provided by Ofsted, other inspectorates and relevant bodies. The letter comments on progress since the recent JAR. 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

Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council's contribution to improving outcomes for children and young people is good. Outcomes are mostly better than similar authorities and the national average. The council has responded positively to the recommendations raised in the JAR report in 2006 and has made good progress since that time. In particular, it has been successful in ensuring that services and departments work well together and have ambitious plans for the future. The council has taken significant steps to improve further integrated working in the new children's services department. The council has a relentless focus on outcomes for young people and is striving to improve services year-on-year. It is responsive to external advice and scrutiny and is proactive in commissioning reports that lead to further improvement. Young people's needs are rigorously assessed and services personalised so that each individual can be healthy, be safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being. The gap between most children and vulnerable children and young people is narrowing. The council's capacity to improve is good.

Being healthy

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. One recommendation emerged from the JAR in 2006.

- Health services should improve the consistency of service provision across the borough in the areas of specialist child and adolescent mental health services, with a particular focus on tiers 3 and 4.

Strong and effective partnerships have enabled health services to reduce most inconsistencies in health provision across the different parts of Sefton. Good progress has been made towards creating a comprehensive Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service. Action to ensure full provision for 16 and 17 year olds is well advanced and interim arrangements ensure that all children in the borough can receive urgent mental health care in the evenings and at weekends. Waiting times for specialist services are now good, and waiting times for non-specialist cases in the north of the borough are improving.

The JAR also identified that the range of health services for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities was variable in parts of the borough. Ensuring that there is equality of access for these children is a key longer term priority and the council is making steady progress.

Most health outcomes are in line with or above those of similar authorities and targeted actions by the council are having a positive impact. For example, the proportion of expectant mothers smoking, and the number of deaths in early childhood, have both reduced. The number of babies with a birth weight of less than 2.5 kg has reduced and the number of children and young people admitted to hospital in an emergency is low. However, improvements in oral health remain stubbornly challenging to achieve and in the least affluent areas oral health has deteriorated. Breastfeeding rates, including the more affluent areas, remain lower than nationally.

Agencies work well together to offer good support to parents and their children. For example, a new service for young people who misuse substances is already making an impact. Teenage pregnancy rates are among the lowest 25% nationally. The latest data shows that in the areas with the highest number of young women aged 15–17 becoming mothers, the conception rate has reduced significantly.

Schools continue to make a particularly good contribution to promoting healthy lifestyles. Almost all are judged in their latest inspection to be good or better in enabling learners to be healthy. Schools value the efforts of local agencies to help children eat healthily and participate in exercise and sport. The council achieved the July 2007 target of 54% for the number of schools with Healthy School status.

Area for development

- Reduce health inequalities across the borough particularly in relation to breastfeeding and oral health.

Staying safe

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the council's services in improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. There were no recommendations for action highlighted in the JAR report.

The majority of children feel safe in their local area. The Local Safeguarding Children's Board is taking appropriate action to ensure that safeguarding has a high profile. It has reviewed its constitution and improved the quality of performance management.

Core assessments, adoptions of looked after children and enquiries leading to an initial child protection conference are all completed in a very timely manner. Since the JAR was carried out, the council has maintained its strong focus on recruiting social workers to improve capacity for service delivery. Children on the child protection register, looked after children and care leavers are all allocated to an appropriately qualified worker. They have their cases reviewed frequently, which in the case of looked after children, is much higher than in similar areas. The council has taken effective action to reduce numbers of social care referrals by almost 50%. The efficiency and recording of responses to initial enquiries has improved. The number of re-referrals, however, although reduced by 14%, remains higher than in similar authorities. A concern was identified in the JAR in relation to the variable quality of core assessments. The council has successfully tackled this issue. New quality standards are in place and a programme of external file audit confirms that the quality of assessments has improved as have assessment arrangements for carers and young carers.

Numbers of children re-registered on the child protection register have risen. This is mainly due to increased awareness of domestic violence and its impact on children, particularly when new partners, with a history of violence, enter the home. This is being monitored well.

Looked after children and care leavers receive effective multi-agency support and very high numbers have their cases reviewed in a timely way. Although the number of children experiencing more than three moves in a year is low, placement stability for children in long-term foster care has worsened by 7% and is lower than in similar authorities.

In partnership with the local police force, the council has made progress in tackling issues in relation to youth gangs in the south of the borough. Agencies have worked particularly well together to tackle bullying, which is having a positive impact.

Vulnerable children and their parents continue to benefit from a good range of preventative support including that provided by the voluntary and community sector. Work has begun during 2006–07 to implement the Common Assessment Framework and the council is confident it will be in place by the end of 2007–08.

Area for development

- Increase the supply and choice of local placements and stability for children in long term foster care.

Enjoying and achieving

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. The JAR report highlighted one action to be taken in the longer term:

- The council, in collaboration with head teachers and school governors, should evaluate variations in achievement between schools in the borough and between specific groups of particularly vulnerable children and young people and how joint services can be deployed to promote social inclusion.

Since the JAR, the council has made good progress in tackling this recommendation. It has detailed information about how different children and young people perform across the borough and has begun to personalise and target its support to individuals, particularly those who the council have identified as vulnerable.

The quality of early years settings, schools and pupil referral units are overwhelmingly good or better. One primary and one secondary school were given a notice to improve between April 2005 and April 2006. The advisory service worked well with the schools giving good support and advice. The schools now provide a satisfactory standard of education and at present there are no schools in an Ofsted category of concern. Early years education is good overall. The council is working very effectively with providers through peer visits and through targeted support from outstanding providers in the borough and from the advisory service. As a result the quality of early years education is improving rapidly.

Children's skills, when they first enter school in the Foundation Stage (nursery and reception), are in line with children's skills nationally. Standards in Key Stage 2 in English, mathematics and science are good and higher than in schools in similar authorities and nationally. Relative to their starting points, most pupils make good progress in primary school.

Children and young people make good progress between Key Stages 2 and 4. The standards that are reached by the end of Key Stage 3 are above the national average and above those reached by children and young people in similar authorities, although the proportion reaching the higher Level 6 is falling. By the end of Key Stage 4, a greater proportion of young people attain five or more GCSEs

grade A* to C than nationally. Once English and mathematics GCSEs are taken into account however, this proportion decreases to slightly below average. Some 60% of young people who are looked after by the local authority achieve at least one GCSE as opposed to 56% in similar authorities and 53% nationally.

The majority of children attend and enjoy their time at school. Fewer than average numbers of children and young people are excluded from school and behaviour is judged in Ofsted inspections as mostly good or better.

Areas for development

- Increase the proportion of young people gaining five or more GCSEs Grade A* - C including English and mathematics.
- Increase the proportion of children and young people attaining the higher Level 6 at Key Stage 3.

Making a positive contribution

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. The JAR recommended no areas for action.

The culture of participation commended in the JAR continues to develop. Agencies work well together to embed participation and gain the views of children and young people in all services. Young people influence the development of council policy, for example the gender equality scheme. A web based consultation enabled the incorporation of individual children's views in the updated CYPP. The contribution of children, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is further enhanced through a strong UK youth parliament and a network of youth forums.

Young people are generally provided with purposeful activities to divert them from anti-social behaviour although young people in the latest survey of their views requested more choice and a greater number of activities. There is a good range of mentoring programmes, including peer mentoring. Young people's advisers are used well in the youth offending service to help prevent youth crime. Multi agency action to improve support for young people most at risk is well prioritised through the Integrated Youth Support Strategy.

Actions to prevent offending and re-offending, including a good approach to restorative justice, have had a positive impact. Re-offending rates are below the national average. The council acted promptly to identify that a change in local policing caused offending rates to rise and this is now being tackled. Good action, in relation to offending by looked after children, has resulted in a reduction in offences.

Some progress has been made in implementing the recommendations of the enhanced youth inspection. Performance management and quality assurance by the youth service have improved. More young people now achieve an accredited qualification and a greater proportion make use of the service. Some 31% of young people aged 13–19 regularly used the service in 2006–07 which exceeded the target of 15%.

Achieving economic well-being

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. The JAR in 2006 highlighted no points for action.

The number of young people who are not in education, employment or training has reduced and is broadly average. The council has ambitious targets to reduce this further by 2% in each part of the borough. The threshold to work initiative has been successful in tailoring support to individuals and families to identify and remove barriers to entering employment.

There is a wide range of childcare provision which gives parents the opportunity to make a valuable contribution to the economy. A recent report, commissioned by the authority, identifies strengths and gaps in provision which the council is acting upon. The target of training one member in every setting as a child tax advisor is almost complete, enabling the authority to advise and support traditionally hard to reach parents and to promote social inclusion. Staff at children's centres are trained in basic skills awareness to identify and support parents with basic and key skills. Parents have good access to adult and community learning.

The council has ambitious plans to regenerate and renew different parts of the borough to provide good accommodation for young people, access to improved recreation facilities and access to vocational courses in sixth forms and colleges. Renewal and regeneration are targeted well to those areas most in need and there are signs that there are improved opportunities for young people who are looked after and for those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

School inspections reveal that over 80% of schools are good or better at enabling children and young people to achieve economic well-being and over a third are outstanding. These percentages are higher than found in similar authorities. Effective action is taken to improve sixth forms and colleges where they have been identified as under performing. The council's 14–19 strategy is based on good collaboration and joint working. Leaflets giving learners impartial information about the full range of learning opportunities available post-16 are distributed to young people in Years 9 and 11 and are of good quality. The council has improved its structures to bid for vocational diplomas and has worked well with other authorities in Greater Merseyside to be ready to introduce an online common application form in 2008. The 14–19 strategy has led to improvement in participation, attainment and success rates. The

proportion of young people gaining a Level 2 qualification by the age of 19 is above the national average and above similar authorities. The proportion gaining a Level 3 qualification however is slightly below average. There is very effective planning to ensure the necessary facilities and workforce are in place to deliver 14–19 entitlements. Pathways and vocational routes for children and young people who are vulnerable are clear and are monitored effectively.

Area for development

- Increase the proportion of young people gaining a Level 3 qualification.

The council's capacity to improve, including its management of services for children and young people

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The council's capacity to improve its services for children and young people is good and its management of these services is strong. The JAR highlighted two actions to be taken over the next six months.

- The council should strengthen scrutiny arrangements for children's services, including corporate parenting and, with partners, improve performance management systems.
- The council and its partners should accelerate plans to implement a joint commissioning strategy to ensure a more formalised and structured approach to the development of integrated health and social care services.

Scrutiny arrangements have strengthened since the JAR. The lead and cabinet members receive detailed and regular information about individual children's performance, particularly in relation to their attainment. They also receive frequent updates about the performance of each service department. The local authority commissioned a detailed report on scrutiny which concluded that Sefton had not kept pace with national developments and needed to change at a political and organisational level. Delays in the report have hindered the council's response to its recommendations. There has been good progress in establishing a joint commissioning strategy. The strategy is based on a comprehensive analysis of current and future needs of children in the borough.

The council provides effective leadership for children's services in the area. It continues to improve well although the pace of improvement could be faster in some areas. There are common objectives and targets which are based on thorough analysis of needs. Priorities set by the council are shared well with partner agencies, parents, children and young people through the CYPP. Some success criteria in the plan are imprecise and hinder the council's ability to demonstrate impact and to scrutinise performance. Partnership and inter-departmental working is a strength. There is substantial involvement of the voluntary and community sector. The council

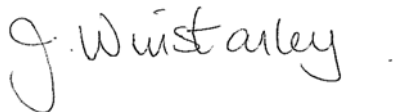
'runs a tight financial ship' and has achieved good or better outcomes with relatively low income. It is innovative in accessing funding and gives good value for money. It has invested well in the training and development of its workforce. Most key postholders are in place and the council is innovative in solving any difficulties in filling vacancies or roles. The council has taken firm action to tackle difficulties in the recruitment of social workers.

Area for improvement

- Ensure that all plans have clear success criteria

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 blue ink that reads "Juliet Winstanley".

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager
Local Services Inspection