

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 Roger Crouch
Executive Director for Children & Young People's Services
Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council
PO Box 41
Shaftesbury House
402 High Street
West Bromwich
B70 9LT

Dear Mr Crouch

Annual performance assessment of services for children and young people in Sandwell 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	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

The overall effectiveness of the council’s children’s services is adequate and delivers the minimum requirements for users. The capacity to improve is good, as is the management of services. Children’s services have improved steadily since the last APA. While the grades remain the same as at the last APA, there is an upward trend in key performance indicators. There has been improvement across a range of indicators related to keeping children safe. Educational standards are also improving overall, albeit from a very low baseline. The number of young people in employment, education and training (EET) is rising significantly from a very low level. The opportunity for young people to make a positive contribution is good, and again improvements have been made, with effective attention paid to a wide range of different groups. The least progress has been made in further improving children and young people’s health despite some positive efforts. Overall, children’s services’ leaders and staff demonstrate, through their work, a clear commitment to improvement in the outcomes for all young people. Actions to achieve this are well-focused and increasingly effective.

Being healthy

Grade 2

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate. This is in line with the council’s self-assessment. 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"> ▪ There is an improved rate of annual health assessments and dental checks of looked after children and young people. ▪ Local targets in relation to the Healthy Schools programme have been met and the number of schools achieving Healthy School status has exceeded national targets. ▪ Progress towards a fully comprehensive child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) is good. ▪ New initiatives to encourage breast-feeding have recently been put in place.
<p>Important weaknesses and areas for development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The teenage conception rate is above that of statistical neighbours and of rates nationally. ▪ Rates of infant mortality are high and compare unfavourably to similar councils. ▪ Breast-feeding rates are low when compared to the national picture and the performance of similar councils. ▪ There is insufficient targeting of the needs of young people requiring specialist mental health support in the community (Tier 3) particularly those aged between 16 and 17 years.

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. However, significant progress has been made in respect of some key performance indicators: this progress consolidates the performance of the council within the grade awarded. The table below sets out the evidence for the grade awarded.

<p>Major strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The completion of initial assessments within specified timescales has improved significantly and performance is better than that of similar councils. ▪ Performance against a suite of staying safe indicators shows good progress from that outlined in the APA in 2007. ▪ Performance exceeds that of similar councils in significant areas such as the numbers of children subject to child protection registration, numbers of children being re-registered and the duration spent subject to a child protection plan. ▪ The high numbers of children looked after are being reduced through coordinated action by the council who are effectively promoting special guardianship as an alternative to looking after children, and reducing the numbers of unnecessary care orders. ▪ Looked after children have generally stable placements and their well-being is regularly monitored.
<p>Important weaknesses and areas for development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The numbers of referrals to the service have fallen and are at a very low level in comparison to neighbouring councils. The council is insufficiently clear about the reasons behind this trend and whether all vulnerable children in need of services and those needing other forms of support can access them appropriately. ▪ Not all children who are the subject of a child protection plan are allocated a suitably qualified social worker. ▪ The completion of core assessments within specified timescales is considerably lower than that of similar councils. ▪ The quality of individual agency management reports, which form a significant part of reviewing and learning lessons from serious cases, has improved but remains too inconsistent. ▪ The time taken to adopt children is longer than in similar councils.

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. However, significant progress has been made in respect of some key performance indicators: this progress consolidates the performance of the council within the grade awarded. The table below sets out the evidence for the grade awarded.

<p>Major strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The council's relentless and responsive focus to raising standards in primary schools means that the rate of improvement in all core subjects at Key Stage 2, and in mathematics at Key Stage 1 is well above the national trend and that of similar councils. ▪ Reading and writing at Key Stage 1 are improving at a rate above similar councils and in line with the national picture. ▪ No primary schools in Sandwell are in a category of notice to improve or special measures. ▪ The rigorous challenge and increasingly innovative support which primary schools have received over a period of time is now extended to secondary schools. The percentage of pupils gaining five or more A* to C grades at GCSE came into line with statistical neighbours in 2007 for the first time. ▪ The percentage of childcare services judged to be good or better is consistently in the upper quartile nationally.
<p>Important weaknesses and areas for development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Standards at all key stages remain well below national averages. ▪ At Key Stage 3 standards also remain below similar councils. The rate of improvement in mathematics and science at this key stage is below that of similar councils. ▪ The percentage of looked after young people gaining at least one GCSE is low. ▪ Attendance at primary and secondary schools is below that of similar councils and national figures. ▪ The percentage of schools judged to be good or better is in the lower quartile nationally.

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 for this outcome area is consistent with the evidence.

Major strengths

- The council has put in place a wide range of structures and opportunities to allow young people to express their views and to influence what happens in Sandwell, from the Building Schools to the Future programme and the 14–19 strategy to the future of residential centres and the provision of housing. Good attention has been paid to the particular needs of children and young people who are looked after, have learning difficulties and/or disabilities, are from minority ethnic groups, and who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender. As a result of listening to the views of children and young people, positive changes have been made to services and approaches at all levels in the council and the borough.
- The percentage of young people reached by publicly funded youth services is above the national average. The ratio of full-time equivalent youth workers is much higher than the national average. A youth work team is successfully helping looked after young people to gain greater access to youth work and to leisure activities.
- The youth offending team (YOT) has reduced the rates of re-offending: these are better than statistical neighbours and national figures.
- The percentage of looked after young people receiving final warnings or reprimands is lower than statistical neighbours and national figures.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- An extensive review of the support for young carers has not yet had an impact on the services provided to the children and young people.
- The proportion of supervised young people in EET has decreased and is now below statistical neighbours.

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 for this outcome area is consistent with the evidence.

Major strengths

- The council's relentless focus on decreasing the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) has been effective in securing substantial improvements for almost all ethnic groups, for young mothers, for looked after young people and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.
- The percentage of personal advisers for looked after young people is high. An increasing and very high proportion of looked after young people have pathway plans, well above that for similar councils and the national rate.
- The effective support for looked after young people to engage in EET means

that figures are better than those nationally and of similar councils.

- The success rate for work-based learning is above the national rate.
- Substantial numbers of learners in local schools receive work-related learning.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- NEET figures, although improving significantly, are still well above statistical neighbours and national averages.
- The percentage of 16- to 18-year-olds whose current activity is not known, while decreasing, is above similar councils and national averages.
- Success rates for Level 2 and Level 3 courses at 16 to 18, while improved, are well below the national averages.
- Standards in sixth forms in schools are well below similar councils and national figures.

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

Grade 3

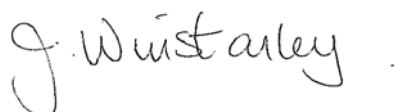
The council's capacity to improve its services for children and young people is good and its management of these services is good. Well-focused and well-led actions have sustained the improvements reported on in the APA in 2007 and led to further notable improvements in all areas. These are being effective in remedying the long-standing and deep-seated weaknesses which existed in a range of outcomes for children and young people in Sandwell. For example, strategies to reduce the number of young people who are NEET are well-led and coordinated, practical and increasingly well-tailored to young people's needs. The post-16 provision which has been set up at the Batman's Hill centre for young mothers is successfully engaging more of these students in EET. Prioritisation is good and has led to clear targeting of resources where they are most needed. Some reorganisation, such as within the school improvement team and the YOT, has further sharpened the council's work, for example highly effective school improvement strategies which have helped to raise standards in primary schools are now being used well in secondary schools, and there is an improved focus on key transition points for children and young people. Although overestimating the grade for two areas, the self-assessment document accurately highlighted the main strengths and areas for improvement and these were illustrated further during the on-site meetings. Data are used increasingly effectively in all service areas to evaluate the impact of actions. Good attention is paid to the recruitment and retention of staff, and innovative action has been taken with positive outcomes, although the recruitment and retention of some key staff, such as English and mathematics teachers and front-line social care staff, remain areas of challenge for the council.

Major strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Leaders are aware of the remaining areas for improvement and their actions are increasingly well-focused and effective. There has been notable improvement in elements of each of the five Every Child Matters outcomes.▪ The local context and its complexities are understood well by all parts of children's services and as a result services are targeted to the specific needs of groups and of areas within the borough.▪ Performance management is directly influencing performance and outcomes.
Important weaknesses and areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ There remain vacancies for teachers, particularly in certain core subjects, and for social care workers, which continues to have an impact on some outcomes for children and young people.

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 style with a period at the end.

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager, Local Services Inspection