

17 December 2008

Mr Robert McCulloch-Graham
Director of Children's Services
Thurrock Borough Council
New Road
Grays
Essex
RM17 6SL

Dear Mr McCulloch-Graham

Annual performance assessment of services for children and young people in Thurrock 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	2
Achieving economic well-being	2
Capacity to improve, including the management of services for children and young people	2

*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

Thurrock Borough Council is delivering improving services for children and young people that meet the minimum requirement for service users. The council's capacity to improve is currently only adequate, since recent improvements to service management processes have yet to be fully and securely embedded. Nonetheless, the council has made a concerted effort to address the recommendations of the joint area review of 2007 and a good start has been made. The new Children's Trust has been successfully established and working relationships between partner agencies are good. Young people are becoming better engaged in the development of services. There is evidence of improvement in a number of key areas, for example in collaborative working to develop and implement the 14–19 strategy. There is now a good appreciation of service strengths and weaknesses, and strong leadership at senior officer level is playing an effective part in raising expectations and setting challenging but realistic improvement goals. Much remains to be done, however, to deliver these goals and, in particular, to address the continuing weaknesses in some service provision.

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.

Major strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Infant mortality demonstrates an improving trend and is better than statistical neighbours. This important trend has been sustained over the last four years. ▪ Waiting times for child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) have improved and are good, in particular, waiting times for non specialist cases are better than the average for England. ▪ The percentage of looked after children who have a health assessment is excellent.
Important weaknesses and areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Almost all schools in the council area are participating in the Healthy Schools programme. However, less than half have achieved the Healthy School standard. This is considerably below the national average. ▪ There has been slow progress in implementing a comprehensive CAMHS. ▪ Teenage pregnancy rates have increased over the last three years, and the 2010 reduction target is unlikely to be met.

Staying safe

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.

Major strengths

- The number of repeat referrals has reduced in the past year, and is now significantly lower than similar councils and rates for England.
- The rate and timeliness of core assessments has improved and is now in line with statistical neighbours. This is a significant improvement.
- There is excellent performance on the timeliness of looked after children reviews, again better than both similar councils and the all England rates.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- Effective use is not made of data on racist incidents collected in schools.
- Insufficient short break capacity for disabled children.
- Child protection thresholds have fluctuated resulting in a steep increase in the numbers of children with a child protection plan.

Enjoying and achieving

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.

Major strengths

- The council has devised a robust model for transition between children's centres, private, voluntary and independent settings and schools. Coherent plans have been developed together with a comprehensive QA scheme to measure impact of training.
- Early Years Foundation Stage results continue to improve, particularly in communication, language and literacy and personal, social and emotional development.
- Trends for Key Stage 3 English, mathematics and science have been improving over the two years to 2007 and are in some areas above those of similar councils in English and science.
- Overall results for GCSE not including English and mathematics have continued to improve over the three year period to 2007 with trends in performance being better than the national trends.

- Attendance rates at secondary schools continue to improve and are in line with the national averages.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- There remains a significant gap in attainment between boys and girls at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage in all six assessment areas.
- Standards at the end of Key Stage 1 for 2007 in reading, writing and mathematics are below those of similar councils and national averages. Boys (especially White British boys) are underachieving.
- Standards at the end of Key Stage 2 in English, mathematics and science are below the national average.
- The proportion gaining 5 or more GCSEs including English and mathematics remains below the national average.
- Fixed rate exclusions in the primary and secondary phase have increased and are above both similar councils and the national averages.

Making a positive contribution

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.

Major strengths

- Mentoring, support and parenting support is a key feature of the commitment to preventive services.
- Transition arrangements for children & young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are improving and are good.
- A high number of looked after children participate in their reviews compared to similar councils.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- The participation and engagement of children and young people is not embedded across the service.
- The number of first time entrants into the criminal justice system has improved but remains higher than similar councils.
- Not enough young people are reached by publicly funded youth services.

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
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The proportion of young people aged 16 to 18 with learning difficulties and/or disabilities who were not in education, employment or training is low and fell to 11.1% in 2006/07 from 17.2% in 2005/06. This is a considerable improvement. ▪ The number of care leavers in education, training or employment is high compared with statistical neighbours and the average for England. ▪ Collaborative working in the implementation of 14–19 strategy. The partnership has restructured itself under the Children's Trust and curriculum framework and quality assurance protocols are in place with young people involved.
Important weaknesses and areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Attainment at Level 2 and at Level 3 at age 19. ▪ The overall NVQ success rate for work-based learners living in the area. ▪ Inequalities in success rates for young people from minority ethnic groups on work-based learning programmes compared to their white counterparts.

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

Grade 2

The capacity of the council's services to improve, including the management of those services, is adequate. The council's analysis of its strengths and weaknesses in such respects is both open and accurate. This is a good starting point, albeit a starting point only, for substantial and sustained improvement in the longer term. Since the 2007 joint area review, the council has worked resolutely and to some good effect in developing, and beginning to deliver, a strategic response to the many areas of service requiring improvement. Both the Chief Executive and the Director of Children's Services are playing an effective part in raising expectations and setting challenging but realistic goals. Working relationships with partner agencies are improving and the Children's Trust has been successfully established. Planning and performance management are now better at all levels of operation. Significant improvements have been made to the management of a number of service areas. For example, collaborative working to develop and implement the 14–19 strategy is now much stronger and effective steps have been taken to involve young people in the process.

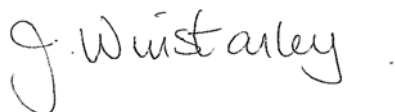
Overall there has been a good start in building a secure platform for delivering substantial and sustained improvement. However, staffing shortages have hindered progress in some areas and much remains to be done before the improvements made to management processes are fully and securely embedded.

Major strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Good awareness of service strengths and weaknesses.▪ Improved working relationships with partner agencies and better involvement of children and young people in service development.
Important weaknesses and areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ High vacancy levels in social care services and schools.▪ Improvements in management processes have yet to be fully and securely embedded and improvement is not yet being delivered in some key aspects of provision.

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 blue ink that reads "Juliet Winstanley".

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager
Local Services Inspection