



Making Social Care
Better for People



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Dear Ms Pitts

ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SWINDON BOROUGH COUNCIL'S EDUCATION AND CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE SERVICES 2005

This letter summarises the findings of the meeting held on 25 July to assess the performance of the education and social care services for children within your authority. We are grateful for the information which you provided to support this process and for the time made available by yourself and your colleagues to discuss relevant issues.

Being healthy

The council's services make a very positive contribution to improving the health needs of children and young people and in most respects outcomes are good. The majority of schools promote healthy lifestyles well through sex and relationships education and provision for sport. The health needs of looked after children are met well. There is a joint council and primary care trust (PCT) funded nurse post. Health and dental checks are delivered at the highest level in the South West. There has been an excellent trajectory from a low base in 2002-2003.

The incidence of teenage pregnancy declined considerably between 1998 and 2003. The councils' work is well targeted on specific wards of the council area. Such focused and successful activity means that the 'stretch target' in the Local Public Service Agreement is within reach.

There have been a number of effective actions taken to promote the mental health needs of children and young people. Since January 2005, primary mental health care workers have provided a single point of entry to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). All children being looked after are screened and there is a high percentage of referrals from the Youth Offending Team. Waiting times for services for looked after children are not adequately monitored. There has been a

significant increase in those working for the service from a social care background. Numbers on the waiting list have fallen. The council's plan is to include CAMHS workers in a multi-agency team providing support to looked after children. An implementation plan for the provision of CAMHS services to 16-18 year olds is underway.

Against this mainly positive background, more work is needed to ensure that the mental health needs of black and minority ethnic children, who comprise nearly 10% of the total, are met. An assessment of their needs has been undertaken and an improvement agenda based on this analysis will be developed by a working group of health providers from September 2005.

Staying safe

The council's work to ensure children and young people are safe has improved in the last year and outcomes are now adequate in most aspects. However, the referral and duty system completes comparatively low numbers of initial assessments within seven working days. Numbers of cases held in the duty system are too high as are re-referral rates. The children and families service has audited too few (only one tenth) of its case files in the last twelve months. All children on the child protection register have a qualified social worker and all reviews are carried out on time, but in comparison only 90% of children looked after have a named qualified social worker.

A CSCI Inspection of Child Protection Services in June 2005 found that the immediate safety of children was being secured, although there were concerns about the longer term planning for children. The level of vacancies of fieldwork staff, particularly in the duty team, was a barrier to improvement. Allocation of case responsibility in this team was unclear for some children. There was a need to ensure that managers at all levels had sufficient focus, grasp and impact when managing a service under pressure. There were well developed protocols between the Police Child Protection Unit (CPU) and social services.

There is good performance in the production of core assessments within 35 working days of their commencement. For child protection work, these are primarily a record of enquiries conducted prior to the initial conference, although there is now a multi-agency assessment format being implemented. Core groups that plan and implement the integrated delivery of services on the ground to registered children and their families have been delayed in some cases and some have no record of discussion.

Forty privately fostered children were identified in 2004-2005. Carers' assessments are overseen by the Fostering Panel and both children and carers are regularly monitored and reviewed. Appropriate training and support are made available to private foster carers.

The fostering inspection in February 2005 found evidence of improvement in the service. Looked after children benefit from relatively stable placements, both in the short term and from a longer term perspective. There have been positive increases in the adoption rate over the last two years. However, only two-thirds of children adopted during the year were placed within twelve months of the decision being made that this was in their best interests. This compares unfavourably with similar councils. With rising numbers of children looked after, there have been insufficient 'in-house' foster carers to cope with increased demand. There has also been difficulty in recruiting sufficient carers with a black or minority ethnic background. There is now a high number of children in external provision and this has contributed to a cost over-run in 2004-2005. The council's response has been to increase payments for skills to its own foster carers and to negotiate preferred status with one Independent Fostering Agency. Although this is a sound strategy, the approach is not yet sufficiently robust to provide an adequate pattern of placement more local to Swindon.

There have been a number of Serious Case Reviews over the last eighteen months and these continue to be commissioned by the Area Child Protection Committee (ACPC). A multi-agency conference has been held to bring together all the lessons learnt and to help to improve working arrangements between agencies on child protection issues. The council recognises that recommendations must be balanced between agencies, properly operationalised and implemented. The social services' training plan has been suitably reviewed and amended to incorporate the training needs identified in these reviews. The ACPC training budget has been re-structured to support external agencies in providing comparable training activities.

Enjoying and achieving

There has been substantial improvement in the quality of Swindon's education services in the last two years and it now makes a good contribution towards ensuring children and young people are able to enjoy life and achieve high educational standards. The weaknesses in attainment which remain are being addressed through feasible strategies which are in most cases beginning to make a difference.

The authority has worked well to improve the attainment of primary school children, there is an improving trend in performance and standards are now in line with national averages and similar authorities. Despite targeted action by the authority which includes a focus on the quality of teaching the attainment of secondary school pupils remains an issue. However, local monitoring and recent Ofsted school inspections indicate some improvement in classroom practice. The 2004 examination results at Key Stage 4 for 5 A*-C attainment are below national and similar authority averages and also lower those attained in Swindon over the previous two years. Attainment of one A*-G grade however, shows an improving trend and is in line with national averages. Provisional data for 2005 indicates further improvement on this picture.

The authority has a robust process for intervening in schools causing concern and challenging schools to improve. There is a good focus on improving the targeting of activities on individuals and groups and make better use of pupil level data to identify underperformance at an early stage. There has been a good reduction in the number of schools in formal categories of concern.

Good progress has been made in reducing absence and exclusion, especially with looked after children where progress has been excellent. Of the 140 children looked after who were of school age only a very few had absence of more than 25 days and none were permanently excluded. This excellent practice has yet to reap rewards in higher attainment and standards achieved by looked after children remain low. Although cohort numbers are small only one care leaver and one child who had been looked after for more than twelve months achieved five GCSEs at A* - C, and the proportion of young people leaving care at 16 with at least one GCSE A*-G has fallen to a third. The great majority have a Personal Education Plan (PEP) and these were in preparation for those who had recently become looked after. However, the council has recognised that the quality of PEPs needs to improve and is in the process of appointing a coordinator to oversee this work.

Reintegration rates into mainstream schools are low, but to some extent this reflects the authority's policy of flexible provision and preventative work. However, the authority has been slow to establish a protocol agreed by all schools that ensures an improvement in these rates. There is an effective policy on special educational needs and thresholds for statements are clear. Statements are provided within required timescales and the authority's performance in this area of work is consistently better than that seen nationally.

School place planning is effective and there are few surplus places. The authority has responded well to the development of extended school facilities and children's centres. There are three existing children's centres staffed on a multi-disciplinary basis and it is planned to develop a further seven between 2006 and 2008.

A wide range of leisure and out of school hours activities exists for children and young people including those who are looked after, have learning difficulties and/or who have disabilities. This work is not yet fully mapped or coordinated to ensure all those requiring provision are able to access it.

Making a positive contribution

The council's work to ensure children and young people make a positive contribution to the community is adequate overall.

Support for young offenders is strong. The Youth Offending Team has well above the national average of supervised juveniles in education, employment or training. The general reduction in re-offending rates is greater than that seen nationally. The proportion of first time offenders, at about a third of the whole group, has remained fairly constant over the last two years. Nine per cent of children looked after for twelve months or more were convicted or subject to a final warning during the year. This is average in comparison with similar councils.

A satisfactory percentage of reviews for looked after children are completed on time but the percentage of children responding and participating in these is just below the average for similar councils. There are good procedures and practices to ensure a smooth transition to adult services for disabled children and all disabled children have a transition plan at age 14+. No direct payments are made to carers or disabled children of 16 and 17 and Swindon is one of only two similar councils in this position. Appropriately, work has commenced with voluntary organisations to give wider representation at child protection conferences and specifically provide advocacy to parents and children with learning disabilities.

The children's fund has been commissioned to coordinate participation work with children and young people. A Swindon-wide participation strategy has been agreed and a forum for practitioners involved in relevant work will meet quarterly, chaired by the children's fund. The social services participation officer will work with the children's fund to coordinate activities and strategies.

Currently consultation and communication with children and young people is patchy although there are some examples of innovative work. The authority has reasonably comprehensive plans in place to restructure the youth service following its unsatisfactory recent inspection report.

Achieving economic well-being

The support provided by the council to enable young people to achieve economic well being is adequate, although there are key areas which require improvement. A 14-19 strategy group has been established. There is a collaborative plan for 14-19 education but this is not yet making sufficient difference to outcomes achieved by young people. The local implementation plan is in place but is currently being revised to meet the recommendations of the recent Ofsted 14-19 inspection report. Provision to ensure increased participation in structured education and training, and employment with training for young people aged 16+ is still too limited.

Employment in Swindon is high and young people are attracted to the immediacy of low paid jobs which require no further education or training qualifications. This means that while the proportion of young people not in education, employment or training is dropping, the number not in learning is higher than the national average. The likelihood of care leavers being in employment, education or training at age 19 is just below half that of others in their age group. This is below the national public service agreement target of 75%.

The great majority of looked after children 16+ now have a pathway plan and all have a Personal Advisor from Connexions. However, less than two-thirds of all former care leavers have a pathway plan, indicating that the service has lost touch with many. In general these young people are well supported in finding accommodation through good joint action between education, social care and housing.

Some success is evident in the progress of back and minority ethnic groups into post 16 learning, especially in good success rates in the completion of apprenticeship frameworks.

SUMMARY

Strengths	Areas for improvement
<p><i>Being healthy:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the promotion of healthy lifestyles through schools • the good focus on supporting mental health needs of children and young people • health support for looked after children. 	<p><i>Being healthy:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • mental health provision for 16-18 year old looked after young people not in full-time education and for black and minority ethnic children.
<p><i>Staying safe:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • work in schools to ensure children and young people enjoy a safe environment • systems to monitor and review private foster care • the stability in placement of looked after children • an improved fostering service. 	<p><i>Staying safe:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • duty referral and assessment systems • the proportion of looked after children with a named, qualified social worker • the recruitment of fieldwork staff.

<p><i>Enjoying and achieving:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • support for attendance • support for schools causing concern • the development of Children’s Centres • improvements in primary school attainment levels • attendance and low exclusion rates for looked after children • SEN statementing procedures. 	<p><i>Enjoying and achieving:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reintegration rates • secondary school attainment • attainment of looked after children.
<p><i>Making a positive contribution:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • work of the youth offending team in supporting young offenders and securing places in education employment and training • reduction in re-offending rates. 	<p><i>Making a positive contribution:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • transition planning for disabled young people including the use of direct payments • the performance of the youth service.
<p><i>Achieving economic well-being:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • joint policies and assessment processes for care leavers • pathway planning for looked after children • accommodation provision for care leavers. 	<p><i>Achieving economic well-being:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the number of young people entering full time education and training, including care leavers • pathway planning and contact with former care leavers.

Service management

The council has high ambition to further improve its services and has demonstrated its ability to improve specific indicators and improvement targets identified by the inspection and regulatory regimes. For example, performance management was previously identified as a corporate deficit but there is now clearer monitoring across functions and departments, using a traffic light system. A clear focus on developing the Every Child Matters agenda is evident in the council’s documentation and good mechanisms are in place for inter-agency consultation and collaboration. For example, the council is suitably advanced in developing a joint children’s centre strategy and common approaches to information sharing. The future direction of the council has been set out in an excellent publication called ‘Full Recovery’. Plans include the appointment of five strategic directors who will each have a portfolio of cross-cutting issues. One of these is the director of children’s services. The council has adequate capacity to further improve its services for children and young people.

There has been positive interim leadership at officer level prior to the appointment of the director of children's services. Major education issues have been addressed and the service is now at the point where the support and intervention of an external provider is no longer necessary. Equally, there are early beneficial signs on children's services of the social care partnership contract with Kent County Council. This contract has focussed on four work streams initially – recruitment and retention, performance management, finance and contracting and commissioning. Child protection has been added as a fifth. There has previously been a lack of policy, planning and development capacity at the centre of social services. Some target setting and forecasting has illustrated too much distance between senior managers and councillors and what is happening operationally, such as monitoring information about the functioning of the duty system.

Barriers to improvement have included workforce issues, funding of social care services for children and young people, and corporate leadership. The historic legacy of underperformance is also proving a barrier which the council is aware it must work hard to dispel. In 2004-2005, the vacancy rate for fieldwork staff in the children and families social care service was 27% compared with approximately 10% nationally. As a response, a local social work training course is being set up, career grade remuneration is being extended and quality service awards are being promoted. These are positive developments. The budget for social care services to children compares unfavourably with that of most similar councils. Given the significance of the issues to be addressed, it is not clear whether the council has reviewed its overall financial commitment to the priorities for children.

In its self-assessment the authority demonstrates a growing understanding of the performance of the service and the needs of children and young people in Swindon. In many cases there is evidence that the right priorities for improvement have been identified, that improvement work is well targeted and that the analysis of need is accurate. Partnership work is developing although the governance arrangements of different organisations and agencies have not yet been fully brought together. The views of parents, carers, children and young people have been taken on board where available, but strategies for their involvement are limited, although some good initiatives have now been developed for the involvement of young people.

Areas for exploration in the joint area review

Staying safe

The incidence of child abuse and neglect is minimised:

- referral, assessment, planning and review systems.

Agencies collaborate to safeguard children according to the requirements of current government guidance:

- the implementation of recommendations of serious case reviews on an interagency basis.

Looked after children live in safe environments and are protected from abuse and exploitation:

- placement policy for looked after children
- the allocation of professionally qualified social workers to looked after children.

Enjoying and achieving

Action is taken to ensure that educational provision 5-16 is of good quality:

- monitoring, challenge and support for secondary schools and strategies for raising attainment at KS3 and KS4.

Children and young people who are looked after are helped to enjoy and achieve:

- the attainment of looked after children.

Making a positive contribution

Children and young people are encouraged to participate in decision making and in supporting the community:

- the work of the youth service in encouraging young people to participate in decision making and in supporting the community.

Achieving economic well-being

Action is taken to ensure that 14-19 education and training is planned and delivered in a coordinated way, and to ensure that education and training (16-19) is of good quality:

- progress in implementing the 14-19 strategy.

Final judgements

Please see your final annual performance assessment judgements attached at the end of this letter.

Yours sincerely



FLO HADLEY
Divisional Manager
Office for Standards in Education



JONATHAN PHILLIPS
Director – Quality, Performance and Methods
Commission for Social Care Inspection

APA final judgements 2005: Swindon Borough Council

Areas for judgement	Final judgements ¹
The contribution of <i>the local authority's social care services</i> in maintaining and improving outcomes for children and young people	2
The contribution of <i>local authority's education services</i> in maintaining and improving outcomes for children and young people.	3
The contribution of <i>the local authority's children's services</i> in maintaining and improving outcomes for children and young people.	2
The overall council's capacity to improve its services for children and young people	2

1

Grade	Service descriptors	Capacity to improve descriptors
4	A service that delivers well above minimum requirements for users	Very good
3	A service that consistently delivers above minimum requirements for users	Good/promising
2	A service that delivers only minimum requirements for users	Adequate
1	A service that does not deliver minimum requirements for users	Inadequate