

26 November 2007

Mr Paul Greenhalgh
Director of Children's Services
Southend-on-Sea Borough Council
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Dear Mr Greenhalgh

2007 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN SOUTHEND-ON-SEA BOROUGH COUNCIL

This letter summarises the findings of the 2007 annual performance assessment (APA) for your local authority, some aspects of which were conducted at the same time as the analysis stage of the joint area review. The 2006 APA informed the scoping of the joint area review, and the initial findings of the 2007 APA were taken into account by the review team at the end of the analysis stage. The outcomes of the joint area review were then considered alongside a review of recent data in arriving at the final APA judgements for 2007. As a result, many of the areas for development highlighted in this letter align with the recommendations in the joint area review report and should be similarly aligned in any future action plan produced by the council and its partners. The judgements in the letter also draw on your review of the Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP), and the evidence and briefings provided by Ofsted, other inspectorates and relevant bodies. We are grateful for the information you provided to support this and for the time given by you and your colleagues to the assessment process.

Overall effectiveness of children's services

Grade 2

Overall, Southend-on-Sea Borough Council delivers services for children and young people at an adequate level, although in a number of respects services contribute well to improving outcomes for their users. Children's services are making a number of significant contributions to improving the achievement, enjoyment and economic well-being of children and young people within a borough that faces social and economic challenges. However, the council has only recently addressed inadequacies relating to their contribution in staying safe.

In addition their contribution to being healthy remains no more than adequate due to inconsistencies in Childhood and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), and in the health provision for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Outcomes in these areas have yet to improve in line with other aspects of the council's services.

Being healthy

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improve outcomes for children and young people in this area is adequate. In the past 12 months the council has continued to improve its performance in the promotion of healthy lifestyles and good health for children and young people in a range of ways. Development in locality working has many good features and examples of best practice existing, for example in the children's centres. These have led to improved coordination and integration of early identification, assessment and intervention arrangements for children and young people. However, practice is not consistent. Despite being strengthened by the appointment of three additional primary mental health workers, which has led to some improvements and a reduction in minimal waiting times, overall provision by CAMHS is too variable. Some aspects, such as the service for those needing treatment in the community, are good. However, arrangements for support at an earlier stage, the provision for out-of-hours and weekend cover, and access for looked after children and young people, and for older young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are not sufficient. This has been recognised and changes are being proposed by a CAMHS transformation project, which is due to report very soon. Provision for young offenders has been improved by the appointment of a CAMHS worker with relevant experience to fill the previous vacancy.

Health provision for those children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities with long-term health problems such as asthma and diabetes is good. However, input from speech therapy services is too variable, and there is insufficient speech and language therapy input into special schools for pupils with significant communication difficulties. Transition planning from child to adult health services is weak.

Overall the council is active, innovative and inclusive in promoting its health related services. Coherent partnership arrangements between the local authority, statutory and some voluntary services are making a difference for many vulnerable children and young people. Healthy living, recreational activity and health assessment for children looked after by the council are good. Targeted work continues to address and tackle the key priorities of teenage pregnancy and smoking cessation. Teenage pregnancy rates remain higher than the averages for England and are inconsistent across the borough, although they are falling at a greater rate than national averages. The proportion of young people with identified substance misuse receiving treatment has improved since 2006. Low birth weights, infant mortality rates and perinatal rates are lower than bench mark groups and national averages.

Focused workshops to tackle substance abuse and promote safer sex have been provided in a variety of settings. The council is aware that the partnership's needs analysis and systems for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of all its prevention activity are insufficiently developed. This means the council and its partners are unable to fully identify needs in relation to substance misuse or the effectiveness of its full range of prevention activity.

Local targets in relation to the healthy schools programme have been met, but the number of schools achieving Healthy Schools status is below national comparators. However, in inspections, a higher proportion of schools have been judged as outstanding regarding the extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles, than in statistical neighbour authorities. Early years provision promotes healthy lifestyles very well, and meets health standards effectively.

Areas for development

- Address the situation regarding out of hours and weekend cover to ensure appropriate services are available at all times to young people needing mental health or substance misuse support. This must ensure that the needs of substance misusers are identified and appropriate services are developed and monitored.
- Improve access and equality of CAMHS.
- Further reduce teenage pregnancies to close the gap between local and national figures.
- Improve health provision and transition planning for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Staying safe

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improve outcomes for children and young people in this area is adequate. Clear interagency child protection procedures and effective initiatives to prevent harassment and bullying help to promote good outcomes for children especially in schools. The high number of children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities who are excluded from school due to challenging behaviour has been reduced to a satisfactory level, and provision for pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties is being reviewed. All children with a child protection plan are allocated to a social worker and initial conferences are held on time. Children looked after by the council have a good level of stability in their placements, and staff are trained and supported to identify and manage risk. The number of looked after children, though reducing, remains too high. Lower than average numbers are placed in residential accommodation and a low number are placed with family and friends in the community.

The number of children placed for adoption in the first year is low, but the number of children in the council's care who are placed for adoption shows an encouraging improvement. Safeguarding checks in schools and council employees are undertaken in line with new national guidelines, and the council is aware that systems need to be more robust to ensure that CRB checks are kept up to date.

In the past there were concerns about the council's ability to safeguard children. Positive action has been taken to improve this situation. After delays resulting from a major restructuring of the Primary Care Trust and a vacancy, recently filled, for the post of business manager, the Local Safeguarding Children Board is now well positioned to drive developments and improvements. They have strengthened their monitoring and oversight of responsibility, and improved the detection and monitoring of children missing from school and looked after children not attending school. The early detection by the council of insufficient completion of initial enquiries (Section 47) into child protection matters has prompted the local authority to ensure that in future such records are checked and properly maintained, and the situation has now improved. The quality and robustness of initial and core assessments completed on time has improved. Recent figures provided by the council show significant improvement, and if maintained, would indicate that these are now at least adequate. However, further work is needed to fully embed the processes. Reviews to discuss child protection planning are held on time. Re-registrations on the child protection register have been consistently in line with or below similar authorities. The number of children on the register has been slightly above comparators and partners have addressed this by appropriately removing those for whom it is no longer necessary. Services are beginning to show signs of improvement and good initiatives are in place to provide a multi agency response to early intervention and preventative services. These are starting to improve outcomes, but not all systems are yet embedded. Services have made an improvement on reducing fatalities on roads, in part because of the involvement of children and young people in road safety training at school.

Areas for development

- Continue improvements in the proportion of initial and core assessments completed on time.
- Improve the focus on preventative services in order to reduce the looked after children population.

Enjoying and achieving

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. Children are receiving a very good start to their education. An above average proportion of early years settings, together with Foundation Stage provision in schools, are judged to be good and outstanding in Ofsted's inspections. Standards at the end of Foundation Stage have improved significantly this year. Most

schools are providing good education, care and services to meet the needs of learners. Results of the Tellus2 survey, carried out with more than 900 children and young people in the authority, showed that on the whole they enjoy school and are proud of their achievements.

This view is supported by school inspections where almost all pupils are judged to enjoy school. The proportion of schools causing concern has decreased markedly. One primary school has required special measures since September 2006, a slightly lower proportion than similar authorities and the average nationally. Firm and decisive action has been taken by the authority to develop school self-evaluation, and to identify and challenge schools. Support for schools causing concern, through the school recovery panels, is rigorous and school improvement is a significant strength of the authority.

Recent performance data confirms an improving trend in attainment. Good challenge and support has led to improved standards at the higher levels in Key Stages 1 and 2, where overall standards are now above those of statistical neighbours. However, attainment at Level 4 in Key Stage 2 has dropped by 1% in all subjects since 2006. Overall, standards at Key Stages 3, 4 and 5 are high, and improving, though there are clear and understandable differences between grammar and non-selective schools. The proportion of young people gaining five or more GCSEs at Grade A*- G is in line with average and improving faster than nationally. This demonstrates improving attainment in the non-selective schools. An increasing number of young people are following Level 1 and 2 routes other than GCSE and achievement is improving. Overall, rates of progress are improving and pupils are making better progress than pupils nationally. Children and young people, with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, are judged on inspection to generally make good progress. However, the council does not carry out a collation or analysis of the progress of pupils working below National Curriculum levels to assess the progress of all groups of pupils. The proportion of young people leaving care in 2007 with at least one GCSE, and with five GCSEs, is above the national average. In addition, work targeted to meet the needs of young people with disabilities, and Black and minority ethnic groups demonstrates the council's inclusive approach, and this is having an effect on improving educational achievement.

Pupils' attitudes and behaviour in schools are mostly good or better. Well targeted preventative work, including programmes to develop the social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL) and the behaviour improvement programme (BIP), has resulted in a significant reduction in primary and secondary exclusions and these are now below national averages. Almost all children and young people now receive full-time education, and the innovative work with young people who offend and who are out of school is an example of best practice. School attendance has improved, with absence rates reducing at a higher rate than nationally, but attendance is still below average. However, unauthorised absence in secondary schools has reduced and is now below average. The authority is systematically auditing schools practices in monitoring absence and promoting attendance, with the intention of improving attendance and raising standards still further.

Provision for recreational activities, including play and voluntary learning is good. A broad range of recreational, leisure and cultural facilities is available to all. Sports provision is a particularly strong feature, but provision also includes an increasing range of other opportunities.

Areas for development

- Continue to improve standards at Key Stage 2 and in non-selective schools.
- Improve attendance rates.
- Ensure progress of pupils working below National Curriculum levels is tracked and analysed.

Making a positive contribution

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate. Having consulted children and young people in 2006 about what they thought were the most important things that needed attention, the council has received positive feedback from children and young people, with a very large majority saying that things are a bit or a lot better in Southend. Feedback from the Tellus2 survey supports this view, and is in line with views expressed by children and young people nationally. Children's and young people's involvement in making decisions about the services they receive is given a focus through the Youth Council and Fix-It, a group of young people with responsibility for the delivery of the Youth Opportunity Fund. Their input has contributed to ensuring that a number of services are shaped to meet children's and young people's needs and wishes. The Participation Strategy, a multi-agency group which runs consultation events and workshops, was launched in March 2006 to enable young people to contribute to decision making. Currently a refresh of the Strategy is underway. School councils are established in all schools, and young people, including those with complex needs, contribute to informing decisions regarding provision. Young carers and young people looked after by the council are consulted. However young people with learning difficulties and/or difficulties are not consulted and neither they, nor young people looked after by the council participate in groups such as the Youth Council. In addition, whilst independent advocacy services to support children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in making complaints or ensuring that any concerns are addressed are available on an individual basis for particular cases, they are not universally available

The network of children's centres plays a strategic and coordinating role across the borough in enabling children, particularly the vulnerable, to access available services. Good examples of this work were seen by the joint area review team and have been reported on by them.

Strategies such as subsidised access for children and young people to leisure and recreational services have been instrumental in the council's unified approach to tackling anti-social and re-offending behaviours. Funding from the Youth Offending Team ensures free access for those young people it supports. Other initiatives such as the 'Being Here' arts project, 'Positive Futures' and the transition project for at risk Year 6 pupils demonstrate the council's commitment to support children and young people at risk of disaffection. The Integrated Youth Support Service provides good opportunities and advice. The proportion of young people aged 13 to 19 reached by Youth Services has improved and at 27% is above the national target of 25%. The council has continued to strengthen support for children's social and emotional development through the SEAL programme, Healthy Schools and the use of learning mentors.

The success of the work of the Youth Offending Service, and the Southend Multi-agency Anti-social Response team to reduce anti-social behaviour has been strengthened by investment from the Home Office for a pilot project. However, children and young people were less positive in their responses regarding staying safe and have indicated concern regarding anti-social behaviour. This in part relates to the anti-social behaviour of visitors to Southend. The partnership has taken action to address these concerns and whilst progress has been made, it remains a priority. Re-offending rates have reduced slightly, and there has been a steady reduction in the number of looked after children being subject to a reprimand, final warning or conviction.

Children looked after by the council are supported through discrete services as well as mainstream provision in schools. In 2006/2007, 73% of children who were looked after attended and participated in their reviews and more young people contributed by talking to independent advocates or others. Since April 2007, the number attending reviews has improved to 100%. This represents a significant improvement.

Areas for development

- Further reduce anti-social behaviour, offending and re-offending rates.
- Implement the revised participation strategy and ensure that all disadvantaged and vulnerable young people are able to contribute to consultation and to shape the services they receive.
- Ensure all children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have access to independent advocacy services.

Achieving economic well-being

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good.

Overall attainment of young people aged 14 to 19 is high, although within this there is, understandably, a considerable difference between the attainment of young people at the grammar and non-selective schools. However, the progress of most young people is improving. Opportunities for vocational education are promoted through collaborative networks involving all except one secondary school, the college of further education and the Adult College. Young people are able to access learning on a variety of sites, including work-based learning and through school/college partnerships. The number of Level 1 and 2 courses for 16 to 19 year olds has increased significantly, and the authority has been successful in one of their three bids to the diploma Gateway for 2008, and one for 2009. However, the 14 to 19 partnership has paid insufficient attention to young people's concerns regarding local access and transport issues. Provision for work-based learning is good, and success rates for learners have improved significantly, although they remain below average overall due to inconsistencies in performance between vocational areas.

Increased participation rates in post-16 learning reflect the improved curriculum and the success of the new model of integrated youth support services. Further action has been taken to strengthen provision, particularly in two non-selective schools, by planning a more personalised curriculum for post-16 learners. The aim is that, by continuing their learning in a familiar environment, this will further support students who would potentially join the group of young people not engaged in education, employment and training (NEET). In addition, the adult college provides alternative education programmes for young people at risk of underachieving, such as a successful programme for young mums aged 16 to 19. The number of young people leaving the NEET group to re-engage in employment, education or training has increased although this remains below the national average. The proportion of young people in the NEET group has fallen from 8.2% to 6.4%, and the proportion classified as 'not known' has fallen from 3.5% to 1.3%

The council, and Essex Fire Service, provide dedicated apprenticeships for looked after young people and care leavers, and these are contributing to more young people remaining in education, employment and training until they are 19. From an acceptable level, the number of care leavers in education, employment and training has risen, exceeding the council's target. The council has improved the availability of suitable housing for care leavers. The Integrated Youth Support Service, which includes Connexions personal advisers, helps ensure continuity of targeted and personalised support for care leavers. As a result of concerns raised by care leavers and expressed to Members, the council has reviewed the funding structure for care leavers to promote their engagement in education.

Areas for development

- Continue to improve the proportion of young people engaged in education, training and employment.
- Ensure the 14 to 19 partnership addresses the issues relating to inequalities in access and transport to training.

Capacity to improve, including the management of services for children and young people

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The council has good capacity to improve its services for children and young people. There is very strong leadership and clear direction from the Corporate Director Children and Learning, senior managers, and corporate support for improving children's services provision. Key appointments to strategic posts made in the last 18 months have significantly strengthened leadership. The lead member for children and young people is highly engaged and having a significant impact on the children's agenda, but the level of involvement of other councillors is relatively limited. Performance monitoring is effective. The council is taking a lead in evaluating the impact of initiatives on children and young people and can demonstrate that this evaluation is being used to further develop services. Where there are inconsistencies, or despite improvements, performance remains below comparators, robust plans are being implemented to deliver further improvement. This action is leading to noticeable improvement in outcomes.

The management of services is adequate overall, although many aspects are now good. The review of the comprehensive and detailed 2006 children and young people's plan shows that good progress is being made across a number of fronts. Good service integration is demonstrated clearly in the implementation of a joint management post between health and the council, and by the multi-agency, multi-professional working. A joint approach to commissioning services is being developed and resources in the region of £1.7 million are already being pooled within the partnership. A Common Assessment Framework system is in use, and is making a positive impact. Very clear guidance has been published, and the council recognises that the Common Assessment Form is not yet used consistently by all partners in line with guidelines. Revisions are now being made following consultation with partners. Systems to identify young carers are too fragmented and information is incomplete.

The council has sought to invest significant funding in the education and care of young people and this reflects the role it plays in improving outcomes in Southend. Financial resources are adequately managed. The cost of the service for children looked after by the authority has been much higher than for similar authorities and national averages. This has been addressed through a revision of the placement strategy and placement costs have significantly reduced. The authority has made proposals to improve mechanisms for evaluating value for money across partnerships, although these have yet to be approved. Funding of council services for education and the youth service are lower than average, but outcomes are good overall.

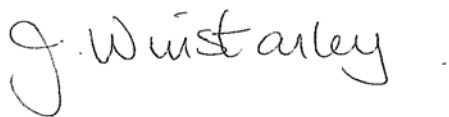
The quality of safeguarding is adequate. Improved recruitment has enabled the council to fill almost all the social care vacancies and to improve the effectiveness of safeguarding. This action has led to some improvement, but further work is needed to fully embed processes.

Areas for development

- Ensure consistency of practice in the use of the Common Assessment Framework, in line with guidelines.
- Continue to improve the effectiveness of safeguarding.
- Improve systems to identify young carers in order to ensure all young carers' needs are met.

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 and will be published to the Audit Commission.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Juliet Winstanley".

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager
Local Services Inspection