

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London WC2B 6SE

T 08456 40 40 40
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 0161 618 8207
Direct F 0161 618 8514
North_apa@ofsted.gov.uk



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

Dear Mr Marsh,

Annual performance assessment of services for children and young people in Sefton 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	3
Being healthy	3
Staying safe	2
Enjoying and achieving	4
Making a positive contribution	3
Achieving economic well-being	4
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 3

Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council delivers services for children and young people that exceed minimum requirements and are good overall. The council’s capacity to improve is good. Since the APA in 2007, services have continued to make a difference to young people’s lives by narrowing the gap between the achievement and attainment of different groups of learners and by continuing to raise standards in schools. The fostering service was judged as inadequate in 2007 because of staffing difficulties and a lack of robust quality assurance of foster placements. The council responded positively to the inspection and recent evidence indicates improvements are being achieved. The timeliness of initial assessments improved this year but remains below the performance of similar councils. The council has successfully tackled issues identified at the last APA and has improved two of the Every Child Matters outcomes, enjoying and achieving and achieving economic well-being, from good to outstanding. Clear strategic direction is provided within the children and young people’s plan and fully incorporates the views of children and young people on how services should be planned and delivered. The council’s good rate of progress has been maintained and in areas requiring most urgent attention, it is strong. Despite this progress and high performance in most services, some outcomes require further improvements, particularly in the fostering service and the timeliness of some assessments in social care.

Being healthy

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.

<p>Major strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Nearly all schools are participating in the Healthy Schools Programme. This exceeds the national picture. ▪ Access to dental services for looked after children is very good. Some 90% had health assessments in 2007, an improvement of 9% since the previous year. ▪ The numbers of conceptions amongst 15- to 17-year-olds is decreasing. The proportion has been consistently below the national average and below similar councils for a number of years.
<p>Important weaknesses and areas for development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The proportion of mothers initiating breast-feeding is 49.2%. This is significantly lower than statistical neighbours where it is 65.9%. ▪ The proportion of young people admitted to hospital because of substance misuse is 11% higher than the national average and higher than statistical neighbours. The trend in admissions is increasing.

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 for this outcome area is not consistent with the admissible evidence.

Major strengths

- The proportion of core assessments completed within 35 days is very good despite a slight fall this year.
- The proportion of young people who are fostered by relatives is almost double the figure for similar councils and for England. The proportion of looked after children who were adopted in 2007 was good. Long term stability improved markedly in 2007/8 and the percentage of looked after children with three or more placements improved in 2006 and was maintained in 2007.
- The inspection of private fostering in March 2008 judged the quality of service to be good.
- The number of children subject to child protection who had previously received such protection fell by 4% in the last year.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- The fostering service was judged to be inadequate in early 2008. The subsequent monitoring visit in July 2008 cited significant improvements had been secured. Some important issues remain such as the relatively low numbers of foster placements.
- Percentage of looked after children with three or more placements during 2007–08 is 3% higher than the national average and similar council areas.
- Although the number of referrals is much lower than in similar councils, the rate of repeat referrals, at almost one in three, is much higher.

Enjoying and achieving

Grade 4

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

- Standards in Key Stages 1, 2, 3 and 4 are consistently higher than similar councils and the national average. The trend over time is one of sustained improvement. There is no school with standards below the government's floor target of 30% of young people achieving five GCSEs grade A* to C including English and mathematics.
- No school has been placed into an Ofsted category of concern for two years and

<p>78% of schools were judged to be good or outstanding at the last inspection.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ School attendance and rates of exclusion are better than for statistical neighbours and for England as a whole. Permanent exclusions have reduced further and are well below the national average with rates of fixed term exclusions being one of the lowest nationally. Persistent absence levels are monitored closely and have reduced year on year to 5.4%.
<p>Important weaknesses and areas for development</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The proportion of looked after children and young people who sit at least one GCSE is similar to statistical neighbours but relatively low compared to all councils.

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.

<p>Major strengths</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The proportion of supervised young people in full time employment, education and training is 91%. This figure is much higher than statistical neighbours and the national average. ▪ The number of children and young people entering the justice system for the first time is reducing. The rate of re-offending has reduced in each of the last three years and is now below the national average. ▪ The percentage of children and young people aged 13 to 19 being reached by publicly funded youth services is increasing much faster than the national target and is close to twice the national average.
<p>Important weaknesses and areas for development</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The percentage of children aged 10 or over who have been looked after continuously for at least 12 months who were given a final warning/reprimand is higher than statistical neighbours.

Achieving economic well-being

Grade 4

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is outstanding. The council's self-evaluation underestimates some important strengths. Although there is an attainment gap between some parts of the borough, overall success rates, retention rates and attainment are consistently high and rising impressively.

Major strengths

- The proportion of young people who achieve a Level 2 qualification is 5% higher than in similar councils and 6% higher than the national average. Performance in 2007 rose impressively by 3%. The proportion of young people attaining a Level 3 qualification also rose by 3% in 2007 and is now 4% above similar councils and 3% above the national figure.
- The proportion of young people who are not in employment, education and/or training is low, particularly for those aged between 16 and 18. There has been an increase of almost 2% in the numbers of young people aged 16 to 18 in learning and this is higher than elsewhere in Greater Merseyside. The number of care leavers in employment, education or training has remained consistently high over the last four years.
- Development of the new diploma strategy has been identified as outstanding by the government office. Good progress has been made in establishing and implementing a 14–19 Strategy. Clear progression routes have been established for young people, including for looked after young people and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- The average point score achieved in A Level qualifications is lower than in similar councils and lower than the national average.

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. Since the APA in 2007, the council has maintained and improved its performance in most areas. A key strength is the effective targeting and deployment of resources and a drive for improvement at all levels. Consequently, particularly in education, young people including those from vulnerable groups achieve very well and attain high standards. Areas of underperformance are usually identified at an early stage and resources targeted to make rapid improvements to the service. The council is highly responsive to external inspection and to internal scrutiny. Targeted support and action was instigated immediately in response to the judgement of inadequate for the fostering service in early 2008. The council, working with partners and external consultants, quickly made improvements which were identified in the recent monitoring visit. Some significant hurdles remain, such as the low number of foster placements and temporary senior social care staff in key positions. The council has begun to make significant strides to tackle staff shortages and to strengthen the performance management of the service. Although the council was aware of the issues within the fostering service through its own self-evaluation, measures to improve the service have not yet had time to impact fully although recent evidence indicates improvements are being achieved. The views of stakeholders drive the focus of issues within the regularly reviewed and revised Children and Young

People's Plan. The council achieves good value for money by providing services that are below average costs whilst achieving, on the whole, high outcomes.

Major strengths

- Consistently high outcomes in many service areas, particularly in education. The trend of improvement is positive and the council performs consistently above statistical neighbours, other Merseyside councils and against England averages.
- The inequality gap between the poorer and the richer wards is reducing. Sixteen children's centres are now open with 55 schools delivering the full core offer for 'extended schools' against a central government target of 30.
- Priorities for improvement are securely based on good consultation with children and communities, on the results of external and internal scrutiny, and detailed self-evaluation.

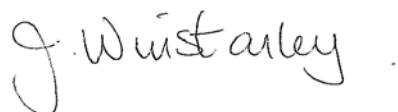
Important weaknesses and areas for development

- The inspection of the fostering service identified deficiencies in the quality and rigour of quality assurance. A recent monitoring visit identified significant improvements in the service. There remains, however, some work to ensure this service matches the good and outstanding services offered by other areas of the council.
- Key staff changes for social care are yet to be fully embedded.

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



Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager, Local Services Inspection