

26 November 2007

Mr Roger Crouch  
Director of Children's Services  
Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council  
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West Bromwich  
B70 9LT

Dear Mr Crouch

## **2007 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN SANDWELL METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL**

This letter summarises the findings of the 2007 annual performance assessment for your local authority. The judgements in the letter draw on your review of the Children and Young People's Plan, including your self-evaluation document, and the evidence and briefings provided by Ofsted, other inspectorates and relevant bodies. The letter comments on progress since the recent joint area review. 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.

### **Overall effectiveness of children's services**

**Grade 2**

The council delivers services for children and young people at an adequate level. This represents a significant improvement since the joint area review. The council has responded very positively to the recommendations raised in the joint area review report. Good progress has been made since that time, particularly in improving aspects of children's social care with regard to safeguarding. The council is accurate in assessing the improved quality of its services. The contribution the council makes to improving outcomes with regard to staying safe and achieving economic well-being are now adequate. The contribution the council makes towards improving outcomes for being healthy, and enjoying and achieving were judged to be adequate at the time of the joint area review, and they remain so. However, the contribution made by the council to enable children and young people to make a positive contribution is now good. There is a strong commitment from the council to embed integrated services and improve outcomes for the children and young people of Sandwell. Leadership of children's services is strong and appropriate staff have been recruited to increase the capacity of the senior management team and the capacity of frontline staff in both education and social care.

## Being healthy

Grade 2

### Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate. Five recommendations emerged from the joint area review.

#### For action in the next six months

- The partnership should improve mental health services for children and young people particularly with regard to the out-of-hours service and access to specialist services.
- The partnership should further develop the range of services to children and young people with moderate autism.
- The Primary Care Trust (PCT) should agree and implement with all relevant partners a strategy to reduce childhood obesity.

#### For action in the longer term

- The PCT should provide a specialist health service to the youth offending team (YOT).
- The partnership should review and develop further the range and availability of family support services to prevent family breakdown and reduce the high numbers of children who are looked after.

Good progress has been made against most recommendations of the joint area review and many multi-agency strategies have been strengthened. However, many of these are recent and are yet to be translated into improved outcomes. The occurrence of infant mortalities and teenage pregnancies is reducing but remains higher than in comparable areas; babies born with low birth weights remain significantly higher and emergency hospital admissions have increased.

Multi-agency arrangements to help children get off to a good start have improved access to information, guidance and support for parents and carers. However rates of breast-feeding and smoking in pregnancy compare adversely with similar areas. Access to health surveillance and dental health services is good. Immunisation rates have improved to a level consistent with national averages. Support services are accessible and targeted appropriately to meet the diverse needs of parents and carers within local communities. Nearly all child care providers and schools meet minimum national health standards.

Well co-ordinated multi-agency services are in place to promote healthy lifestyles for children and young people. Most children and young people, responding to the Tellus 2 survey, consider themselves to be very or quite healthy. Ninety seven percent of schools are actively involved in the Healthy Schools programme and 48% have achieved Healthy Schools Status. Programmes are very well designed and address local priorities including obesity, substance misuse and sexual health. The local area agreement includes challenging targets to reduce high levels of obesity among children. Provision to reduce teenage pregnancy is delivered through dual processes of universal services centred on schools and targeted provision for the most vulnerable young people. The rate of reduction of teenage pregnancies at 10% is better than in comparable areas and close to the national average of 12%. Improved joint working arrangements to combat substance misuse, including alcohol misuse, have led to a substantially higher numbers of young people receiving treatment.

Many aspects of the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) have improved. Plans and protocols are in place to support the implementation of a comprehensive service, including out-of-hours services and services for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Provision for assessment and therapeutic treatment has increased, as has guidance for staff working in schools and children's centres. Waiting times for assessment and treatment are consistent with national averages, with very good compliance with timescales for assessment and treatment for young offenders. Arrangements have been strengthened to ensure safe care for young people requiring hospital treatment. However, the service is yet to be underpinned with a comprehensive analysis of mental health needs of children and young people in the area. A recent comprehensive review has been undertaken to address concerns that thresholds and access routes to CAMHS services are not well understood across partner agencies and schools

Services to improve health outcomes for looked after children are good. Compliance with requirements for health assessments has improved substantially from 47% to 74%. Integrated services for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities promote early identification and support for families. A strategy for improving services for children with autistic spectrum disorder is at an advanced stage of development.

### **Areas for development**

- Increase the rate of breast-feeding and reduce the rate of mothers smoking in pregnancy.
- Clarify thresholds and access routes to CAMHS services and ensure that service provision is underpinned with a comprehensive needs analysis.
- Complete and implement the strategy for improving services for children with autistic spectrum disorder.

## Staying Safe

## Grade 2

### Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to ensuring children and young people are safe is adequate. Seven recommendations emerged from the joint area review.

### For immediate action

- The partnership, the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) and the council as the lead agency for safeguarding should ensure that:
  - the social care improvement plan (including the actions from the recommendations of the inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the death of Victoria Climbié) continues to be implemented on a multi-agency basis to ensure, as a matter of urgency, that looked after children and children likely to be at risk of significant harm are adequately protected
  - a clear overarching and well-coordinated approach to safeguarding and preventing harm is developed and implemented to ensure all agencies are clear about their and others' roles and responsibilities in accordance with sections 10 and 11 of the Children Act 2004. This should specifically include children living in households where there is a risk of domestic violence
  - a system is introduced for routinely monitoring the progress and effectiveness of all child protection support and intervention
  - the procedure to identify and support children in private foster care is implemented
  - social care recording and filing is improved so as to be compliant with the standards in the SSI publication Recording with Care.
- The partnership and/or LSCB should routinely and regularly review the social care improvement plan to ensure milestones are realistic and urgent remedial action taken if targets are unlikely to be met.
- The council should urgently improve recruitment and retention of social workers.

### For action in the longer term

- The partnership should review and develop further the range and availability of family support services to prevent family breakdown and reduce the high numbers of children who are looked after.

Nearly all areas for improvement identified in the joint area review report have been addressed resulting in significant improvements in multi-agency safeguarding arrangements and the management of frontline social care practice. The responsiveness of agencies to child concerns appears to be secure. Managers are

aware of some weaknesses that persist and have put in place appropriate corrective action.

Parents and carers have good access to information and guidance to keep their children safe. Most schools have travel plans to promote healthy lifestyles and road safety and the numbers of children killed or seriously injured on roads are reducing. Nearly all child care provision meets national standards relating to health and safety. However, the Tellus2 survey shows that more children and young people feel unsafe in Sandwell than nationally. Multi-agency arrangements to combat bullying, racism and domestic violence have been strengthened leading to timely and effective communication between key agencies. A strategy to raise awareness about private fostering requirements has led to an increase in notifications.

Revised thresholds for service have increased the number of children receiving earlier intervention and support. Plans to fully implement the Common Assessment Framework are on schedule for completion by March 2008 and have engaged partner agencies well.

Numbers of referrals to social care services have increased substantially since 2005. However, the proportion of referrals leading to initial assessments and the numbers of child protection registrations have fallen to a low level. Appropriate management action has been taken to increase understanding of thresholds for intervention across agencies and to eliminate some long standing poor decision-making within social care. Monitoring reports show significant increases in initial assessments and child protection conferences over the past six months. Compliance with timescales for initial and core assessments has much improved but remains below national and comparable council averages. A case file audit system has been established and is helping to address inconsistency in the quality of assessments. The allocation of child in need cases and referrals has improved significantly. All child protection cases and nearly all looked after children are allocated to qualified social workers. Support and supervision of social workers are well managed and an impressive reduction in the use of agency staff from 94 to 24 has increased continuity of service for children and young people. Compliance with timeliness of child protection reviews is very good.

The effectiveness of the LSCB has been enhanced through strong leadership, senior representation from partner agencies and the appointment of a business manager. The Board has rightly prioritised the improvement of child protection practice and has overseen delivery of the joint area review action plan. Agencies are now compliant with recommendations of the Victoria Climbié Enquiry and Bichard requirements for safe recruitment practice. Training provision is reaching high numbers of staff across agencies. Strategic links between the Board and Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements have been strengthened. However, the Board acknowledges that its process for undertaking serious case reviews lacks rigour. It is now extending its agenda to the wider safeguarding agenda and has prioritised the development of a child death review process.

Improved multi-agency arrangements to support looked after children have been led by a stronger corporate parenting board. The profile of looked after children has been raised and some new opportunities introduced for young people such as apprenticeships and free leisure passes. The number of children looked after has reduced and is now consistent with comparable areas. Placement stability is good and security promoted through high numbers of adoption and special guardianship orders. Effective recruitment and retention of foster carers together with improved care planning has reduced the need for external placements. However, the quality of care is inconsistent. A robust action plan is in place to improve one of the council's children's homes that has failed to meet national minimum standards. Planning and provision for young people leaving care, including accommodation options, are very good. Integrated service provision for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities has led to more families having access to short breaks and support and better transition planning for young people moving into adult social care provision.

### **Areas for development**

- Increase compliance with timescales for initial and core assessments.
- Ensure that robust processes are in place for the management of serious case reviews and child death reviews.

## **Enjoying and achieving**

**Grade 2**

### **Summary of strengths and areas for development**

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate. Three recommendations emerged from the joint area review.

#### **For immediate action**

- The council should ensure that schools are diligent about passing on reports to the council about racist incidents.

#### **For action in the next six months**

- The council should improve its arrangements for the monitoring of special educational needs outcomes, the quality of provision and value for money.

#### **For action in the longer term**

- The partnership should increase the range of leisure and recreational opportunities available to children and young people.

The authority has responded appropriately to the concerns raised in the joint area review report with regard to the way in which schools pass on to the council their reports of racist incidents. However, the changes have not yet been fully implemented and, therefore, have had limited impact. A standardised electronic recording system has been purchased and installed in all secondary schools and these schools have received the necessary training to be able to use the system efficiently. No formal reports relating to electronically reported incidents have yet been made as the system has not been fully implemented in all primary schools. This is due to be achieved by late 2007. The first formal report to elected members and the Trust Partnership using the new system is anticipated to be in the spring term of 2008.

The monitoring of outcomes for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities has improved but needs further development. A range of information is gathered about pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities which forms the basis of the local authority's monitoring and subsequent challenge and support to schools. However, there is a lack of clarity about what constitutes satisfactory or good progress for these pupils, and how this should be monitored and evaluated. Methods used, such as reading tests, are insufficiently wide ranging and do not correspond with methods used by schools, such as assessment against national curriculum sub-levels. The local authority has a reasonable understanding of the quality of provision for these pupils in its schools and the value for money, and has evaluated in detail the schools' views of the quality of the support provided. Schools view the support they receive from the inclusion support service positively. Procedures for issuing statements are efficient.

Sandwell has made a good start to improving the range of leisure and recreational opportunities available to children and young people. Nearly 900 young people were supported in the last year to gain an accredited outcome through Youth Service activities. An investment of £1.25 million has led to the 'Triple S' programme being developed which involves a significant number of young people in a wide range of sports and physical activity, and opportunities for residential and cultural opportunities have been extended. The young person's transport strategy has begun to make it easier for young people to gain access to leisure activities. Good progress has been made in implementing the extended schools strategy, and a number of schools have gained accreditation in study support.

The expansion of children's centres is on track. Where child care settings have been found to be inadequate the council has taken decisive action and has closed them when necessary. Sensibly, the local authority has aligned the support for child care settings with the Foundation Stage school improvement team to ensure that there is a consistency of approach and an appropriate level of challenge. Outcomes by the end of the Foundation Stage, although still below national figures overall, continue to improve.

Standards of attainment in Sandwell remain well below national averages at all key stages but the gap between Sandwell and similar authorities is beginning to close and, overall, standards have been improving at a rate at least in line with the national rate of improvement over several years. Standards at the end of Key Stage 2 have improved faster than the national rate in English, mathematics and science. The percentage of pupils gaining five or more A\*-C grades at GCSE or equivalent by the end of Key Stage 4, while remaining low, is also improving faster than the national rate of improvement and most schools are reaching the suitably challenging targets set by the local authority. No schools are below the Key Stage 4 floor target which is a better picture than both nationally and among similar authorities. Improvement is weakest at Key Stage 3.

Pupils make the best progress between Key Stages 1 and 2: in 2006 the progress Year 6 pupils had made during Key Stage 2 was better than the national rate and has continued to accelerate, placing Sandwell in the top 40 authorities in the country in 2007 for this indicator. Between Key Stages 2 and 4 some schools enable pupils to make very good progress, but there is too much variation in the progress made by pupils in the best and worst performing schools. The local authority provides robust challenge to schools alongside appropriate support, but there remains some intransigence among some secondary schools which need to improve at a faster rate. The proportion of looked after young people who gain five A\*-C is lower than the national average but in line with similar authorities, and a good proportion gain one A\*-G or equivalent.

While the recruitment and retention of teachers has improved overall in Sandwell, there are significant gaps in staffing at secondary schools, particularly in English, mathematics and science. This has had an adverse effect on raising standards at Key Stage 3 in particular and has limited the effectiveness of consultant support for some schools. The local authority is working strategically with schools and within the Black Country Partnership to increase the number and availability of Advanced Skills Teachers, to recruit and retrain subject teachers, and to support schools in preparing staff for subject leadership roles.

Attendance in both primary and secondary schools has improved. It remains below the national averages in both phases, although only slightly at primary. Rates of unauthorised absence have risen and authorised absence rates have fallen which reflects the impact of the local authority's concerted efforts to encourage schools to authorise absence only when parents give an acceptable reason. This strategy has enabled the education welfare service to gain a more accurate picture of the absence patterns in the borough and to take suitably rigorous action to challenge and support the families of persistent absentees. The use of legal sanctions has risen and the local authority is beginning to see evidence of the impact of this. The attendance of looked after children and young people is good.



Fixed-term exclusions in Sandwell are lower than national averages at both primary and secondary levels. While permanent exclusions remain higher than the national average they have fallen significantly each year since 2004. The school improvement team have initiated and funded robust consortium arrangements among secondary schools to facilitate managed moves for pupils in danger of exclusion, and to manage the exclusions panels. Data indicate that since the initiation of this system the rate of permanent exclusion has dropped sharply. Similar arrangements have begun with primary schools. In 2005/06, no pupils were permanently excluded from special schools and the rate of fixed-term exclusion was half the national rate. Importantly, the local authority is working strategically with schools on the wider issues of ethos and inclusion, for example by joining the first phase of the National Strategy's secondary SEAL programme.

Overall, the school improvement team's work is analytical and well focused: officers have a thorough understanding of the needs of the children and young people in Sandwell; they are responsive to schools' needs, and their approaches to the challenge presented by the urgent need to raise standards are rigorous and innovative.

### **Areas for development**

- Implement fully the new system to monitor racist incidents in school and ensure that regular reports are made to the council so that it is fully aware of incidents and can act accordingly.
- Clarify what data need to be used by the local authority to assess the progress made by pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and align this with tracking and assessment methods used by schools to ensure greater rigour and consistency.
- Challenge secondary schools where pupils are making the least progress to further accelerate the pace and consistency of improvement.

## **Making a positive contribution**

**Grade 3**

### **Summary of strengths and areas for development**

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. Two recommendations emerged from the joint area review.

### **For action in the next six months**

- The partnership should improve the coordination and coverage arrangements to engage young people in making a positive contribution to the service development and design of their own service plans. Opportunities for consultation with children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities should be further developed.

- The partnership should ensure that there is improved coordination and working between the police, YOT and the council education, social care and youth services to reduce anti-social behaviour and offending and decrease the numbers of young people known to the YOT who are not in education, employment or training.

The council's work to ensure all groups of young people are enabled to make a positive contribution is extensive. Its work in this area is characterised by a focused and strategic approach within which all partners are working effectively together to improve outcomes for children and young people. Services target and effectively support the most hard-to-reach and vulnerable children and young people and their families. Aspects of work which have previously been the weaker elements relating to this outcome have improved significantly in a relatively short period of time.

Following the Enhanced Youth Service inspection in 2006 which identified some outstanding and some weaker provision, all provision was observed by managers and strategic plans were put in place to build on the considerable strengths. The very strong project work has been expanded with careful thought given to how to reach some vulnerable groups of young people. For example, a project has begun working with transgender and bisexual young people. An innovative programme of work with four secondary school councils has enabled these schools to strengthen the processes to enable pupils to make a positive contribution to good effect, and this is part of a wider plan for the youth service to work even more closely and constructively with schools to develop school councils. More young people than the national average are reached by publicly funded youth services; the ratio of youth workers to young people has increased significantly since 2004 and is now better than the national figure. A good proportion of Sandwell young people gained a national accreditation through their work with the youth service in 2006. A comprehensive training programme has led to staff being well qualified and confident in their roles.

An extensive school-based mentoring programme has had a significant impact of reducing exclusions and improving attendance of a group of disaffected pupils. The council's preventative work through the Youth Inclusion Support panel with young people who are in danger of offending or have begun to be involved in anti-social behaviour is good. Careful attention is paid to the support given to parents and families. Funding gained through the Respect Task Force has been carefully used to set up family intervention work with the most challenging families. The strategic targeting of such funding streams at providing high quality and nationally recognised training for staff has made a good contribution to developing the council's capacity to improve further.

The YOT has been an underperforming area of the council's services. However, recent improvement has been swift and far-reaching, affecting the service's leadership and management and its outcomes. A restructured management team has led to improved clarity of functions and efficiency. An audit of all YOT cases has been analytical and has led to a more proactive allocation of resources. The most recent remand figures are much improved and custody figures have decreased to be

close to the national target. The proportion of young people in education, employment or training is higher than the national average. Sandwell has performed consistently well regarding recidivism and the 2006 target for reducing re-offending was exceeded. The percentage of looked after young people cautioned or convicted is significantly lower than similar areas and the national figure. Like the youth service, the YOT has prioritised training for staff and this has been effective in securing a significant improvement in outcomes.

A comprehensive peer review system among partners results in supportive yet challenging monitoring and evaluation of the management and effectiveness of agencies such as the YOT and the youth service.

The council's work to enable looked after children and young people to make a positive contribution is good. The Looked After Children Board is well established, with a membership of 15, two of whom are also members of the Shadow Youth Cabinet. Members have produced an induction booklet for newly looked after young people and have acted as trainers for courses. Play workers are currently working with a group of younger looked after children with the aim of giving them the skills to be able to form a Junior Looked After Children Board. Young people's participation in looked after children reviews has improved dramatically and is significantly better than similar authorities and better than the national average.

Consultation with children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities has improved, including access to an independent advocacy service. Young people have been consulted on and contributed to a range of service planning, including healthcare needs, an audit of leisure facilities and car parking arrangements. Ninety five percent of reviews of individual education plans include the views of the child or young person. A pupils' forum for pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities has also been established.

Support for young carers is extensive and has become part of a new and increasingly better co-ordinated strategy to meet the needs of this group. Robust social care processes help to ensure that the needs of young carers are met swiftly. Three youth workers and a Connexions Personal Adviser are dedicated specifically to supporting young carers. Support for newly arrived asylum seekers and children living in families with no recourse to public funds is well thought out and managed.

There is an extensive range of parenting programmes and support, from early years communication and language programmes, to intervention with whole families to try to break the cycle of crime, encompassing a wide range of agencies. The council has identified that the co-ordination of this aspect of work needs some improvement in order to maximise its effectiveness and has begun a thorough audit.

### **Area for development**

- Establish the strategic coordination of the council's work with young carers and the council's work with parents.

## Achieving economic well-being

Grade 2

### Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect has improved and is now adequate. One recommendation emerged from the joint area review.

#### For immediate action

- The partnership should ensure that there is a clear 14-19 strategy that is understood by all partners and is informing the planning and development of services.

Secure progress has been made in ensuring that the 14-19 strategy is well understood by partners and influences the planning and development of services. Partners are working well together; as a result, there is an increasingly broad and coherent range of provision for young people aged 14-19. Sensibly, the council's 14-19 team is working closely with the secondary school improvement team. This has led to a greater clarity of roles and to a shared understanding of the ways in which educational opportunities need to be planned and realised for young people. The three consortia which include all of the borough's secondary schools are developing well and becoming increasingly effective, particularly with regard to post-16 provision. This is an important part of Sandwell's strategy to improve attainment at post-16 level and to ensure that courses are better matched to the needs of the students. The council has found that there is some reluctance among a few secondary schools to engage fully with Sandwell College and with work-based providers which can limit the opportunities available to their 14-16 year old students. However, this is being appropriately challenged by the council and is showing signs of improvement.

After a period of being deemed to be inadequate, Sandwell college has improved. Attendance and recruitment rates, particularly for 16-18 year olds, have risen sharply and indicators suggest that success rates will improve significantly this year. Plans for a major building programme are currently being finalised and will be subject to LSC and planning approval in the near future.

Attainment at post-16, while improving, continues to be weaker overall than both the national picture and similar authorities, which reflects the legacy of historic weaknesses in strategy and provision. Exceptions are attainment at NVQ Level 3 and NVQ work-based learning, both of which were better than the national picture. The success rate for work-based learning is similar to the national rates; it is good for minority ethnic learners and particularly good for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Robust action has been taken by the council and its partners to reduce the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training. There has been a steady reduction in the number of 16-18 year olds not in education, employment or

training and those not known between 2004 and 2006. Figures for this timeframe are better than similar authorities but worse than the national picture and Sandwell is well aware of the need to consolidate and accelerate the progress which has been made to date. Strategies demonstrate a careful consideration of the needs of different groups of young people. For example, there is a well-thought out programme for young people who are leaving care which includes a good level of personal support to enable them to be successful. These strategies are having a positive impact: the proportion of looked after young people in education, employment or training is very good in comparison with the national figures, and there has been a steady rise in the number of supervised young people and teenage parents who are in education, employment or training. Action has also been taken to help employers to better support young people with various needs. Three voluntary organisations have been engaged to provide tailored employment and training for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The partnership has begun to engage the public sector in a series of work and training programmes for young people, for example one which involves the health service in a school-based accredited training programme. This demonstrates the council's and the partnership's understanding of the complexity of employment issues in the borough and their determination to improve opportunities for young people.

There has been a significant reduction in the proportion of local authority homes which are classified as 'non-decent' and Sandwell is working steadily towards meeting the national target in 2010. The length of time for which families stay in bed and breakfast accommodation is shorter than the national average and hostel accommodation is not used. A recent serious issue which arose with the quality of accommodation for people seeking asylum was tackled by the council very swiftly and robustly. Sandwell has developed two projects to provide supported accommodation for teenage parents, which between them provide 39 units, and an additional scheme is under development. Some young parents are also given eight weeks of intensive support in one of several 'training flats' before moving to live independently. The percentage of care leavers living in suitable accommodation is broadly in line with the national picture.

### **Areas for development**

- Embed all the recent 14-19 developments.
- Monitor closely the extent to which secondary schools are ensuring that students are fully aware of their entitlement and the options that are available to them and provide challenge and support where necessary.
- Continue to increase the number of young people who are in education, employment or training post-16.

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

**Grade 3**

### **Summary of strengths and areas for development**

The council's capacity to improve its services for children and young people is good, and its management of these services is good. Seven recommendations emerged from the joint area review.

#### **For immediate action**

- The partnership should review the Children and Young Persons' plan to:
  - incorporate the recommendations for action arising from the joint area review, the re-inspection of the 14-19 service, the youth inspection service and the re-inspection of the YOT
  - identify the actions most critical to improving outcomes for children and young people over the next 12 months
  - identify and routinely monitor the specific aspects of service improvements on outcomes for children and young people.

#### **For action in the next six months**

- The partnership should:
  - build further financial and human resource capacity for improvement through developing a systematic and broadly owned approach to securing value for money
  - develop further a common workforce strategy and plan
  - increase the engagement of all agencies and the pace of implementing common processes such as information sharing, common assessment and lead professional.
- The partnership should develop further the extent to which issues of diversity and race equality are satisfactorily included in planning service developments.

Following the joint area review, the council rigorously tackled the most serious areas of longstanding underperformance. As a result, there has been significant improvement in these aspects of the council's work. In addition, the council has made at least some progress in all the areas which were identified by the joint area review as needing improvement and impressively has continued to make progress in furthering developments in line with new national guidance. Perceptive leadership from the Interim Director of Children's Services was pivotal in beginning the good rate of progress. The secure systems and structures which have been put in place by

a range of knowledgeable managers, combined with a suitably rigorous approach to training and development, have ensured that the rate of improvement is sustainable. Managers at all levels understand their roles and have been inspired and enabled to take firm leadership of their areas of responsibility. Managers have a very good understanding of the needs of different groups of learners, such as those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and those who are looked after, and plan carefully to meet their needs and they are able to demonstrate the ways on which they have secured improvement. They also have a thorough understanding of Sandwell's context and the way in which their work needs to focus constantly on raising aspirations and attainment. There is no underestimation among managers of the extent of the task ahead in continuing to deal with the longstanding and deep-rooted difficulties in improving the health, well-being and life chances of young people in Sandwell, and there is a strong emphasis on problem solving and action planning among the council and its partners.

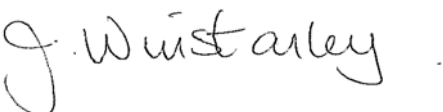
Careful attention has been paid to the recruitment and retention of frontline staff to good effect, both in social care and education. Underperformance and its underpinning long-standing cultural issues have been robustly tackled. As a result, staffing is more stable and more effective at all levels, and there is a strong focus on the training, support and performance management of staff across the directorate's functions.

Partnership working is a strength. Partners share the council's vision and aspirations for young people in Sandwell and strategies are well designed and well co-ordinated. The ambitions of the council and partnerships are challenging. There is a well-articulated vision and a clear drive for continuous improvement. The council is well aware that the outcomes for children and young people in Sandwell continue to need improvement in many areas and is determined that good outcomes will be achieved. The pace of change has been relentless but has been tempered with a realistic understanding of the need to prioritise. Moreover, the council has embraced the Change for Children agenda alongside the very clear focus on specific improvements.

Overall the council has demonstrated good progress in meeting the joint area review recommendations, and has shown good capacity to maintain and improve further its services 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.

Yours sincerely

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

Juliet Winstanley  
Divisional Manager  
Local Services Inspection