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Ms Anna Wright
Director of Education and Children's Services
Reading Borough Council
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Dear Ms Wright

2007 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN READING 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 where it was available, and the evidence and briefings provided by Ofsted, other inspectorates and relevant bodies. 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

Reading Borough Council consistently delivers services for children and young people at an adequate level overall. Good contributions have been made by services to improving outcomes in two out of the five key areas, including staying safe. Contributions in three areas are adequate. Whilst outcomes in some areas have not yet shown the full impact of the council's initiatives, much good work is being undertaken, with a great clarity of purpose and based on very comprehensive needs analysis. Health indicators show a broadly average picture. The council works well to provide a wide choice of educational provision for parents, children and young people. Secondary schools are improving steadily but standards in primary schools are not high enough yet. The proportion of young people gaining level 2 qualifications at ages 16 and 19 is still too low. The local authority is working well on the Extended Services and Workforce agendas and the common assessment framework is well integrated.

Being healthy

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. There have been significant improvements in coordination and health provision and particularly in joint working since the reorganisation of primary care trusts in October 2006. Health provision for the most vulnerable is improving and outcomes for those in many target groups are rising as a result and have reached good levels. Health outcomes for children and young people in Reading are adequate overall. Health performance indicators such as immunisation rates, the numbers of babies dying around the time they are born, uptake of breast-feeding, proportions of expectant mothers smoking and dental decay data are in line with national averages. It is against this background that the Children and Young People's Plan prioritises accurately integrated preventative services. The long-term pattern of health needs is well understood in the area. Since the last annual performance assessment the council has monitored progress in the three areas identified for development very closely and has taken targeted action with key partners. General practitioners, the Children's Information Service, children's centres and the developing extended schools are among the agencies giving good access to healthcare information, promoting early support and intervention for physical and mental health issues.

Healthy lifestyles are effectively promoted in early years settings, with significantly better inspection grades than nationally for being healthy. The council supports all schools in promoting healthy eating, take-up of regular physical exercise and emotional wellbeing initiatives for their children and young people. The council is beginning to track outcomes and has seen a discernible upturn in numbers taking healthy free school meals, although the impact on obesity is not yet known. The number of schools participating in the National Healthy Schools Standards programme is higher than the national target. However, due to a staff vacancy now filled, there was a dip in progress towards the December 2007 achievement target at the July interim target date, with only 40% having achieved the standard, a shortfall of the expected 50%.

Working with the regional teenage pregnancy adviser, the council has made progress since the last assessment to put in place a holistic action plan to tackle the high rate of teenage conceptions. National comparative data for the last 12 months are not available but first quarter returns for January to March 2006 show a reversal in trend: a drop from 65.3 to 41.2 per 1000 of the relevant population. The council and partners have speeded up and targeted preventative work. Initiatives include building the confidence of teachers to deliver related topics in the curriculum in secondary schools, emergency contraception available in a pilot school, and more systematic involvement of GPs. However, the overall number of teenage pregnancies remains too high.

There has been good progress in implementing integrated child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) although the final shape of joint working arrangements between the council and Primary Care Trust is yet to be decided. Increased preventive support available in schools and the community has brought a significant rise in referrals to specialists, but waiting times have not been adversely affected. Access to services for those with behavioural disorders is being re-routed through GPs. Children aged 15 and under responding to the Tellus2 survey indicated that fewer Reading young people drink alcohol compared with their peers nationally, and that they do not smoke or take drugs to the same extent. Reading is making good progress in developing the range of services to combat substance misuse, with no waiting time for treatment, although the high percentage in treatment is of concern. There has been a positive step change in the amount of drug prevention activity in the first quarter of 2007–08.

Outcomes for looked after children and young people are good. Some 84% have health and dental checks on time, in line with the national picture. The appointment of a dedicated children's nurse in the new 'Through Care' team has improved health coordination for looked after children and young people placed out of the borough. All looked after children under five had the relevant developmental checks on time. There is a very good range of health support for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities including a clinical psychologist for those with learning difficulties. A special school was among the first of the schools in Reading to achieve full Healthy Schools standards.

Areas for development

- Further reduce teenage pregnancies.
- Reduce the numbers of young people aged under 18 in substance misuse treatment.
- Decrease the percentage of expectant mothers who smoke and increase the uptake of breast-feeding.

Staying safe

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. Restructuring to bring about locality working and integrated services has been managed well. Key areas of performance have been maintained to good effect for the most vulnerable looked after children and young people and those on the Child Protection Register. Areas for improvement identified in the last assessment have been tackled effectively. Schools, early years and care settings provide safe environments and the council is rigorous in monitoring any safeguarding action arising from inspections. The extent to which children and young people in schools are free from harassment is better, on average, than found nationally.

New access and assessment teams were put into place in November 2006 to provide a sharper focus on preventative services and improve the timescales for completing assessments of need. The time taken to carry out initial assessments was a concern at the last annual performance assessment but improvement is now being seen. In 2006–07 Reading had two and a half times the national rate of referral, representing a three times larger rise than the national average. Additional resources were secured to deal with a more than 150% increase in domestic violence referrals. Improved information technology systems enable managers to prioritise responses more effectively. Although comparative data show that the completion-on-time rate for initial assessments, at 48%, is below the national average of 68%, local data show an acceptable rate of improvement to near national averages since November 2006. Similarly, the volume of core assessments increased rapidly and rates of completion within the timescales fell below the national average, but started to improve towards the end of the year.

Good work is done to manage the high volume of child protection cases effectively. There was an increase in the volume of section 47 enquiries in 2006–07. However, once registered, child protection cases are given very active attention and de-registered efficiently. There are low numbers of re-referrals and the percentage of re-registrations at about 16% is good in national terms. Last year, all children and young people on the child protection register had an allocated social worker and 100% of reviews were carried out on time.

A robust multi-agency business plan with emphasis on integrated preventative services and training is in place for the Local Safeguarding Children's Board. There are no concerns about thresholds for referrals in the area and very good advances on using the common assessment framework.

The numbers of looked after children and young people are high compared with the national picture but placements are stable and there is comprehensive support from the innovative 'Through Care' team. As in the previous year, placing very large sibling groups in care accounts for high numbers of new looked after children and young people and high numbers overall, taking the size of the children's population into account. All looked after children and young people have qualified social workers, which is an outstanding improvement from 78% last year. At 84% of cases, the proportion of reviews held on time is considered comparatively good nationally. The long term stability of Reading's looked after children and young people in 2006–07 was at a level just short of the 80% national target by 2008. This performance is amongst the best nationally based on the Public Service Agreement target. Good proportions, in comparison with national figures, benefit from adoption, special guardianship and family and friendship placements; low proportions are in residential placements.

The work of the designation of needs panel is having good impact on assessing the appropriateness of placements for all looked after children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Gaps have been identified for those with autism

and high end behaviour needs or learning difficulties. Advocacy arrangements and transition support are good.

Area for development

- Ensure continued improvement to the timeliness of initial and core assessments.

Enjoying and achieving

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 overall. The impact of the local authority's work is visible in improved outcomes for young children aged five and in secondary schools but standards have not yet risen quickly enough in primary schools in Key Stage 1. There are still too many pupils who leave Year 11 with no qualifications.

The 2006 figures for children's attainment, as given in the Foundation Stage profiles, were lower than in England as a whole although unvalidated data show a considerable improvement this year. The local authority has worked effectively and with many partners to strengthen the provision for young children's personal, social and emotional development. Work has also been undertaken to boost children's progress in early literacy skills and number work which have been relatively weak areas in the past. This work has involved parents as well as professionals. Ofsted inspections in the last year show educational provision in nurseries and childcare settings is good overall.

Results in tests at the end of Key Stage 1 have been below those in similar local authorities and nationally for some years. They were poor in 2005 and declined further in 2006. The trend of improvement in Key Stage 1 results is below average for reading and writing but average for mathematics. A wide range of actions and interventions has been developed and implemented to raise attainment by the age of 7 and the local authority is providing robust support and challenge to schools. At Key Stage 2, there has been a positive trend in improvement in test results; the trend is much faster than in similar authorities. In 2006, test results were broadly average for English and science but below average for mathematics. Whilst attainment in 12 primary schools was below floor targets in Key Stage 2 in 2006, latest figures show that this number is reducing.

Standards in secondary schools are showing a steady improvement overall. Test results in Key Stage 3 in 2006 rose from 2005; they were broadly average for English and mathematics but below average for science, based on the percentage of children and young people gaining Level 5 or higher. Unvalidated results for 2007 confirm the picture of steady improvement. Performance in Key Stage 4 showed a significant improvement in 2006 on previous years, based on the percentage of children and young people gaining five or more GCSE grades A* to C. The figure was broadly in line with that in similar authorities and nationally. In 2006, a much higher than average proportion of Year 11 pupils left with no qualifications. Performance is above floor

targets in all secondary schools. Value added measures vary greatly between schools and are low in places. Some positive actions have been taken to improve secondary schools. These include: a federation; joint working between schools; intensive work with targeted pupils; close working between the school improvement services, school improvement partners and external consultants; and curriculum improvements.

The educational qualifications of looked after children and young people are still not as high as those achieved by this group nationally. A virtual headteacher for looked after children and young people is steering energetically the strategies for improving outcomes for them. Looked after children's attendance at school is good overall. A lower proportion of looked after children and young people than last year have been placed more than 20 miles from home. The local authority has improved its systems for keeping a close track on the progress of specific groups of children and young people, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. This tracking covers those children and young people educated in and out of the borough. Those attending the Phoenix special school make extremely good progress. Elsewhere, the progress of children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is generally typical of that made in similar local authorities. The progress of children and young people from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds is also tracked carefully and underachievement by children and young people of Pakistani heritage has been identified and is being addressed; the gap in attainment is reducing.

Attendance in primary schools is broadly average and in secondary schools it is above average. Attendance figures show a steady improvement over the past few years. In 2006, the level of permanent exclusions in secondary schools was above the national average. The number of fixed-term exclusions in primary schools has risen however, and the local authority is working with schools to devise specific provision to limit such exclusions. The latest published figures for the percentage of permanently excluded pupils provided with 20 hours or more tuition a week are below average.

There are no secondary or special schools in Ofsted categories of concern but one primary has a notice to improve and one junior school requires special measures. A primary school had the need for special measures removed this year. The proportion of primary schools deemed to be good or better in their Ofsted inspection reports is lower than average. The local authority has a robust approach to addressing under-performance in schools.

Areas for development

- Raise standards in primary schools, at all stages, but particularly in Key Stage 1.
- Reduce the proportion of young people, including looked after children and young people, leaving Year 11 with no qualifications.
- Reduce exclusions.
- Increase the proportion of permanently excluded pupils that receive 20 hours or more tuition.

Making a positive contribution

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. The council and schools have introduced a culture of improving well-being with a wide range of settings contributing support to social, emotional and personal development. The Reading Anti-Bullying Alliance has vetted all primary and special schools' anti-bullying policies. The council has established effective procedures for dealing with racial abuse and has a dedicated helpline for schools, parents, children and young people.

The range of opportunities for children and young people to contribute to their schools and communities is good. The youth service reaches good numbers of young people, with 33% of 13- to 19-year-olds counted as participating in youth work activities compared with 27% nationally. The service provides targeted support to vulnerable groups and gives a strong lead on engaging young people to participate in decision making in the community. There is a good range of democratic participation through a youth cabinet, youth parliament and school councils.

Levels of volunteering among teenagers are high. The borough's youth offer research in 2007 found that one in four young people say they volunteer, many on a regular basis. A strategy is being developed to accredit more volunteering. There is a very active Duke of Edinburgh award scheme in which young people with disabilities also participate and achieve highly. Many younger children take advantage of peer mentoring opportunities in schools to good effect on behaviour. Young people act as learning mentors on a range of personal well-being topics, including sex and relationship matters, although an overarching strategy to coordinate peer mentoring and teaching is still in development.

The council places high priority on increasing the participation of children and young people in shaping children's services. Young people have been involved in the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership over a full range of topics. An interactive web-site is being piloted in collaboration with a neighbouring council. Young people's views have been effective in improving access to child and adolescent mental health and Drug and Alcohol Team services. The £58,000 resource of the Youth Opportunities Fund has been allocated with the involvement of young people.

The work of the youth offending team, the police and other agencies to combat anti-social behaviour and offending is good. To address issues of poor image and perception of young people in Reading, the council ensures that children and young people play an active part in shaping media coverage. There is wide range of well targeted diversionary activities including summer programmes. The Reading Youth Offending Team is judged to be operating well by the Youth Justice Board, with a risk led approach and key performance indicators rated as good. Young people who do

offend are given good support and re-offending rates are falling faster than in comparable areas and England and Wales overall and is now just below the national average. There has been steady decrease in the proportion of looked after children and young people who offend.

Arrangements to involve looked after children and young people in their care reviews, including for those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, are good. All participate to some extent in reviews, and 84% take part in all their reviews, in line with the national picture. Borough-wide consultation and participation plans ensure that views from children and young people in these groups are included. Advocacy support arrangements are effective. Transition planning for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is well established and all eligible young people have a detailed multi-agency plan and good links to adult services.

Areas for development

- Develop systematic and structured support to enable more children and young people to teach and mentor each other.
- Improve, for children aged 11 and under, the extent of their participation in and contribution to their communities, and the coordination of it.

Achieving economic well-being

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. Performance in A-levels or equivalent (Level 3) is well above the national average. The proportion of young people achieving Level 3 qualifications by the age of 19, however, whilst slightly higher than the national average and in similar authorities, is a little under a half. Fewer than two thirds of young people aged 19 gain a Level 2 qualification: this is below the national average. The proportion of young people continuing in education after completing Year 11 has increased but is still below the national average. The NVQ success rate for all work-based learners living in the area is broadly average.

The overall quality of post-16 provision in secondary schools varies greatly. In two out of the seven schools it is outstanding, and in others it is mostly satisfactory. Based on school inspection evidence, the extent to which pupils in schools develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being is not quite as good as in similar authorities. Reading has made significant progress in developing and implementing a coherent 14–19 strategy. The Reading 14–19 Consortium submitted five programmes across five vocational lines to the Diploma Gateway process and all gained approval for a 2008 start. The success of these applications demonstrates a high level of collaborative working at strategic and operational levels to deliver vocational programmes.

The percentage of young people aged 16 to 18 not in education, employment or training fell in 2006–07 to 7.3% from 10.3% in the previous year: it is now slightly below the national average of 7.7%. The figure for young people aged 19 also fell from 9.0% to 5.8%, which is better than the average of 8.2%. These reductions reflect good work. The local authority is still ambitious in its work to prevent young people from ever going into the not in education, employment or training category as well as reducing the not in education, employment or training figures themselves. Actions in the Children and Young People's Plan are wide ranging and some are already showing a positive impact, such as support for teenage mothers to access and succeed in education. A high proportion of young mothers have signed up on the 'Care to Learn' programme. The Youth Offending Team is working effectively with offenders to reduce the numbers not in education, employment or training in this group. Key indicators on employment, education and training in relation to care leavers have improved in the last year and are now very good. A higher than average percentage of care leavers live in suitable accommodation. Good support is provided for the most vulnerable young people over the summer period from their leaving Year 11 and going into Year 12, for example.

Survey results of early years provision to measure parental satisfaction have led to a re-design of services in locality areas so as to increase the levels of affordable childcare. Two-thirds of respondents to the survey rated their childcare either 9 or 10 out of 10. The Children and Young People's Plan includes actions to develop the knowledge and skills of parents and some good work is already established in the children's centres.

Areas for development

- Increase the proportion of young people aged 19 gaining level 2 qualifications.
- Reduce further the percentage of young people not in education, employment or training.

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

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The management of services is good. The leadership of the Director and senior officers is a strength. Alongside a robust approach to improving outcomes for children and young people, based on an extremely thorough analysis of need, this good leadership is a key element in the authority's good capacity for further improvement. The 'Logic Model' approach to planning has assisted the authority to produce a very clearly articulated vision and an ambitious and well prioritised programme of improvement. The large majority of issues raised in the 2006 annual performance assessment have been dealt with positively.

Even where indicators have not yet reached national averages, the progress towards such a point is clear in most places, and particularly for vulnerable groups. Although there is still much to do, good capacity has already been demonstrated in the maintenance and improvements in all five outcome areas and particularly for looked after children and young people. The new 'Through Care' team has made a considerable impact on the well-being of looked after children and young people, as has the innovative virtual headteacher post.

Partnership working and change management are also strengths. A good example of partnership working is the priority given to promoting healthy lifestyles where the local authority, Primary Care Trust and a range of partners have contributed to planning and action. Similarly the links with and use of the private sector, and joint working between schools have contributed to improved outcomes in the Foundation Stage and in secondary schools. Within the authority, behaviour and attendance services have been moved within the school improvement service providing a focused and coherent approach linked to attainment. In a drive to boost children's reading skills, common key messages are conveyed in libraries, by educational psychologists, advisers and others.

The extensive service restructuring has been managed successfully. Further development in locality teams is planned, and for the section working for children and young people with special education needs. The impact of the improved secondary school improvement strategy is clearly visible. For primary schools, impact has not been marked. This was due in part to staff vacancies that have been considerably improved. The school improvement team as a whole is stringent in its work in both challenging and supporting schools.

Systems for collecting, collating, analysing and responding to performance management information have been improved considerably and are used very well. This is demonstrated, for example, in youth service statistics and in relation to keeping a check on children and young people's standards and achievements. Senior officers scrutinise performance data assiduously and respond swiftly where necessary. The way in which the authority seeks and uses the views of children and young people, and their parents and carers is good and there are many examples of how priorities and actions have been determined in the light of these views as well as through other comprehensive needs analyses. The local authority's web-site has been developed although more needs to be done here to ensure that children and young people are fully informed about the range of services and activities available for them. A lower than average proportion of children and young people felt well informed about these, based on the Tellus2 survey.

Reading's information sharing and assessment approach is effective and used well across services to ensure comprehensive and coherent approaches to meeting the needs of vulnerable children and young people. The work on the common assessment framework and Information Sharing and Assessment has been celebrated nationally and adopted elsewhere.

The income and expenditure on social care is broadly average, and spending on children in need but not in care is good. A higher than average amount per young person is spent by the Youth Service. Teaching vacancies have been reduced but are still slightly higher than nationally or in similar authorities and schools report some difficulties in recruiting science teachers of good quality. The service is very effective in prioritising its use of resources. In the last year, it directed funds swiftly to respond to a sudden increase in cases of need and staffing was increased to meet the demand. Much support has been provided for the continued professional development of Reading's early years professionals in particular as part of a robust programme of workforce development.

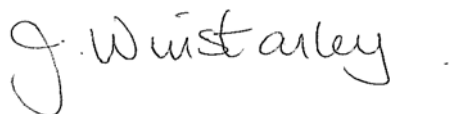
Most Reading schools are experiencing increased popularity although a high proportion of secondary school children and young people still attend schools out of the borough. New growth in demand is putting pressure on reception year places at individual schools. Surplus places exist but, in the light of significant numbers of new arrivals into the area, many from Nepal and Eastern Europe, the surplus is expected to be eliminated in most schools.

Areas for development

- Complete the re-modelling of services for children and young people with special educational needs, and the phased implementation of the locality teams.
- Improve further the availability of and access to information about services and activities provided to 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