

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London WC2B 6SE

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

Direct T 0117 945 6293
Direct F 0117 945 6554
South_apa@ofsted.gov.uk



17 January 2008

Ms Janet Tomlinson
Director for Children, Young People and Families
Oxfordshire County Council
Macclesfield House
New Road
Oxford OX1 1NA

Dear Ms Tomlinson

2007 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

This letter summarises the findings of the 2007 annual performance assessment (APA) 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

The overall effectiveness of children's services is adequate, though with good features and one that is outstanding. The contributions made to being healthy and achieving economic well-being are good and children and young people are helped to make a positive contribution in outstanding ways. Although there are aspects of the council's services that make a good contribution to staying safe, there are weaknesses within the referral, assessment and child protection systems that are sufficient to make the contribution to staying safe no more than adequate. In enjoying and achieving, while the direction of travel is positive, the pace of change has been too slow to overcome long standing weaknesses in the educational outcomes compared with those in similar authorities.

Being healthy

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. In the past 12 months the council has continued to improve its performance in the promotion of healthy lifestyles in a range of ways. Parents and

carers continue to receive good advice and support and there is clear evidence that resources from all agencies, including children's centres, extended schools and locality teams, are focused on improving outcomes in areas of highest deprivation. For example, the Smoking Cessation Service runs Stop Smoking sessions in schools and has now increased links with children's centres.

Ofsted Early Years inspections judged that all settings were satisfactory or better in enabling children and young people to be healthy. The council exceeded by 13% the national target (50%) for the number of schools with Healthy School Status by July 2007. Exercise and participation in sport is successfully encouraged and the Tellus2 survey shows 40% of young people participate in physical activity at least six times a week.

During 06/07 good progress has been made in improving early access to mental health services for children and young people. The establishment of the Primary Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (PCAMHS) has resulted in greater efficiency with high rates of user satisfaction. Earlier screening, assessment, support and diversion of some young people to Tier 1 and 2 services has resulted in reduced waiting times and more appropriate referrals to specialist services. However, nearly a quarter of young people within the Youth Offending Service who were referred for a specialist assessment for substance misuse experienced a delay that was longer than five working days in receiving it. Once assessed, all have access to treatment within 10 working days.

Although showing a decrease, teenage pregnancy and conception rates remain significantly higher than those of similar councils. The council and its partners are aware of the challenge and work continues to address key priorities and ensure that the council is on track to meet the government target set for 2010. The impact of this work is beginning to show in that more young people are accessing the projects for advice and support. In the Tellus2 survey, 64% of young people (in line with the national average) commented that they felt they had good enough information on sex and relationships.

Support for vulnerable groups, such as children who are looked after and young offenders, is strong. The proportion of looked after children (87%) who have annual health and dental checks has improved since last year and is now very good. Substance misuse is routinely addressed. Where it is required, there is a fast track system in place to refer young people to CAMHS and substance misuse services.

Health services for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are well supported. Additional resources have been allocated to children's Occupational Therapy. All disabled children who need it have access to CAMHS.

Area(s) for development

- Increase the focus on the reduction of teenage conception.
- Ensure all young people with identified substance misuse needs receive specialist assessment within five working days.

Staying safe

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 with some good features.

There is a wide range of programmes delivered across agencies to promote and support children, young people and families to stay safe. The Tellus2 survey shows that a large majority of children and young people feel safe around the local area, on public transport, going to and from school and within their homes. Death from road traffic accidents continues to fall and is now 51% less than it was in 1998. Ofsted inspections of Early Years' settings and schools judged children and young people to be provided with safe environments.

The number of children in need referrals relative to child population has reduced significantly and is now well below that of statistical neighbours and national average. This gives rise to concern that the thresholds for accessing services are too high. Of those referrals which go on to have an initial assessment, 84.7% are completed on time, a significantly higher percentage than statistical neighbours and national average. Of core assessments, 95% are completed on time, again a significantly higher percentage than that for statistical neighbours and national average. However, these figures are against a background of a very low referral rate compared with statistical neighbours, and therefore it follows that, with lower levels of referrals, there would be lower levels of assessments, and that a higher percentage of these would be completed on time.

The Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Board has identified concerns about thresholds and capacity, and some inconsistencies in multi-agency planning and decision making for children in need of protection. Although the number of children on the child protection register is in line with statistical neighbours, there have been increases in both the numbers of children de-registered and in re-registrations. The proportion of child protection investigations that lead to initial child protection conferences within 15 days is below national and comparable council's averages. The Board has produced a set of robust priorities for 2007/08 to address these concerns relating to social care capacity and thresholds and to strengthen safe recruitment and vetting processes; basic child protection work and inter-agency communication.

There are comprehensive tracking and monitoring systems in place to establish and identify the whereabouts of children 0–16 who are missing or move off school rolls.

The council continues to have effective strategies in place to support a year on year reduction of children entering public care. For example, the impact of a new Prevention and Intervention Team has proved successful in reducing the number of children who need to be looked after from 34 per 10,000 in 2006 to 30.5 per 10,000 in 2007.

Overall performance data in relation to looked after children is good. Corporate parenting responsibilities are well supported by individual members but Oxfordshire acknowledge that a more coordinated approach is needed across the council and its partners. Good progress has been made in recruiting new foster carers. Placement stability is good with 82% of looked after children and young people placed in foster care. The percentage of adoptions of children looked after has declined but this has been due to court processes and contested hearings. The council has addressed this issue through the Court of Appeal and anticipates its previous good level of performance will be restored. The timeliness of reviews for children who are looked after has shown significant improvement from 68% to 81% and is now in line with statistical neighbours but below the national average, putting it in the 'acceptable, ask questions' band. The council has addressed this issue by ensuring there is focused attention to timescales and earlier programming to ensure availability of key people. During 2006/7 the number of care leavers with a Pathway Plan and/or an allocated personal adviser has decreased. The council report that this has been due to capacity issues in the service.

A good range of support services are available for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities that include respite care, short breaks and the use of Direct Payments. Over 90% of young people aged 14–18 have a transition plan for managing their move to adult services.

Area(s) for development

- Review thresholds for referrals to social care services to ensure that they are not set too high.
- Increase the percentage of initial child protection conferences that are held within 15 working days.
- Review decision making arrangements when children are de-registered.
- Improve the percentage of reviews of looked after children that are held on time.
- Ensure all care leavers have a Pathway Plan and a personal adviser.

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 with some good features. Although outcomes have continued to improve, the rate of change has not been fast enough to overcome long-standing weaknesses. Results at Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 4, while in line with the national average, remain below those in similar authorities.

The effective partnerships in the early years continue to support settings in all sectors. Ofsted inspections resulted in no actions at registration showing that potential providers are well aware of the requirements. There has been a considerable rise in 2006/07 in the proportion of settings judged to be good or outstanding, which is above the figures nationally and in similar authorities. The proportion of children reaching the early learning goals has continued to increase in all areas of learning. There are still some anomalies in the age at which children start school but, following consultation, all four-year-olds will be funded for full-time attendance at school from September 2008.

The proportion of schools placed in categories of concern by Ofsted inspections has declined this year and is now very low. Task groups and supported school reviews have helped schools to improve and, in most cases, to be removed from categories relatively quickly. In addition, intervention powers such as Formal Warning Notices and Fresh Start have been effectively used to bring about improvement and to prevent some schools from going into categories in the first place.

In 2006, assessment results at Key Stage 1 were significantly below those in similar authorities for the third year running. From Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 2 pupils made the expected progress and achieved results that were broadly in line with those in similar authorities in English and mathematics, though they were below similar authorities in science. Key Stage 2 results were in line with the national figures, except in English where they were above them. From Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3 students made a little more than the expected progress. Results at the age of 14 were generally in line with those in similar authorities and with the national figures. At Key Stage 4, there were some important improvements in 2006. From Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4 students made more than the expected progress, which was much better than the situation in 2005. In 2006, none of the secondary schools fell below the floor target of 25% gaining five good grades at GCSE. Despite these significant gains, GCSE results in 2006 were once again below those in similar authorities on nearly all measures. However, the results were at least in line with the national figures on all measures and more than three percentage points above the national average on the important measure of five good grades including English and mathematics. The attainment of pupils of black and minority ethnic heritage shows a mixed picture, with fluctuating results from different groups. No clear trend can be identified. In 2006, most groups performed in line with their peers nationally, though pupils of Indian heritage under-achieved.

Attendance at school continues to be good in both primary and secondary schools. Permanent exclusions remain low and nearly all permanently excluded students are provided with alternative full-time education soon after they have been excluded.

A new Play Charter was launched in May 2007, following extensive consultation with young people. The Tellus2 survey shows that a higher proportion of young people than nationally think that the activities in their area are good enough, and that they know enough about them.

The educational achievements of children who are looked after have continued to improve and in 2006-7 the proportion leaving care with at least one GCSE grade was well above similar authorities and the national figure. The latest available figure for the proportion with five good grades was also above average. The attendance at school of children who are looked after has improved steadily over the last two years and is now better than in similar authorities and nationally.

The targets for the proportion of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities gaining five GCSEs have been met. Fixed term exclusions in special schools are much lower than in similar authorities or nationally and there were no permanent exclusions in 2006.

Area(s) for development

- Improve results at Key Stage 1 so that they compare better with those in similar authorities.
- Continue to improve results at Key Stage 4, at a faster rate, so that they compare better with those in similar authorities.
- Understand more fully the factors affecting black and minority ethnic attainment so that well-targeted support can be given where necessary.

Making a positive contribution

Grade 4

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is outstanding. The key strength is the wide-ranging way in which children and young people are regularly consulted and contribute to the making of decisions. In the Youth Forums, in each of the District Council areas, young people aged between 13 and 19 make important decisions about how funds are to be allocated. Groups of children aged between 5 and 13 are trained and supported to make fair, collaborative decisions which include the allocation of funds from the Community Chest budget of around £50,000. Through the well-established Sounding Board, children and young people regularly meet with senior officers and elected members and their views are carefully and seriously considered and make a difference to the decisions that are reached. The importance of consultation is well-embedded and runs through the services that are provided for vulnerable groups: for example, the young carers' projects are regularly evaluated by the young people involved. Young people also make an important contribution to the training of a range of professionals and are involved in making appointments, including the recent appointment of the Director for Children, Young People and Families.

Schools have active and well-established school councils and a greater proportion than nationally of young people responding to the Tellus2 survey feel that their views are listened to in the running of their school. Ofsted inspections judge behaviour to be good or outstanding in 85% of schools.

Levels of youth offending continue to fall. The number of first time entrants to the Youth Justice System decreased by nearly a quarter in 2006, compared with the previous year. There are effective intervention programmes for those at risk of offending and the latest figures for re-offending show a 10% drop since the previous year. The Diversion Scheme, which has successfully brought about a considerable reduction in the number of looked after children who have offended, is now being extended to five additional vulnerable groups. The Youth Offending Service has been successfully integrated into the Children, Young People and Families Directorate, enabling its strengths to be sustained, while developing closer links with other teams.

The participation of looked after children in their reviews is very good at 95%, above the national figure and well above the figure for similar authorities. They make a significant contribution to the quality of the services provided for them. An increasing number of them are being selected and trained as "source workers" to act as advocates for their peers. The source workers have produced a booklet about the care system that has been distributed to children, young people, carers and social workers. The offending rate among children who are looked after has continued to fall: it is now only just above that of the population as a whole, and the ratio is half that in similar authorities and nationally.

Children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have good opportunities to make a positive contribution. They are involved in all the consultation and decision making forums and are given any support they may need to ensure that they can make a full contribution.

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. Young people responding to the Tellus2 survey showed high aspirations, with a smaller proportion than nationally wanting employment at 16 and a higher proportion aiming to go to university. The proportion of young people who are in education, employment or training (over 95%) continues to be well above the national figure and above that of similar authorities. However, the figures for some vulnerable groups are not so positive; the proportion of teenage mothers in education, employment or training is under 30%, a little below the national figure.

All schools and colleges are now in established partnerships to develop the curriculum offered to young people in the 14–19 age range. The increased flexibility that is being offered is making an important contribution to GCSE results: in 2006 more than a third of the good grades at GCSE were in vocational subjects, compared to only 1 in 40 in 2000. Outcomes by age 19 are generally above the national figures and in line with similar authorities.

In 2007, the proportion of young people leaving care who were in education, employment or training was very high (84%). The number going to university continues to rise and there is a volunteer programme to give them support while they are there. The proportion of care leavers who are living in suitable accommodation has risen considerably over the last year and is now above the figures for similar authorities and nationally.

There has been a further rise (to over 88%) in the proportion of young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities who are in education, employment or training, in line with similar authorities and above the national figure. The Connexions service, which is now part of the local authority, continues to help them to find the right pathway: 90% of their parents and carers responded to a recent survey expressing satisfaction with the work in aiding transition. During the last year, parents, special schools and colleges have worked together with the local authority and the learning and skills council to address the long-standing issue of post-16 provision for young people with severe and complex special educational needs. New arrangements have been put in place in September 2007; however, it is too early to judge their effectiveness.

Area(s) for development

- Increase the proportion of teenage mothers 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 council has good capacity to improve its services for children and young people. There is a new Director for Children, Young People and Families who is providing strong leadership and there is good corporate support for ensuring the full integration of children's services and for quickening the pace of change. The 2006 CYPP Review has accurately identified where progress has been made and where there are further areas for development.

There is evidence of good partnership working and some key appointments have been jointly funded between Children's Services and Health. Some joint commissioning strategies and processes are in place and are having a positive impact on outcomes for children and young people, for example, PCAMHS. The participation and active involvement of children and young people in service planning is outstanding and based on long-standing practice. The council has given clear priority to supporting looked after children with good results. Appropriate steps are being taken to strengthen the corporate parenting function through the development of a holistic approach across the council. There is also a continuing focus on improving outcomes for children and young people who live in the more deprived areas of the county. However, the council has been slow on addressing the needs of families, children and young people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds.

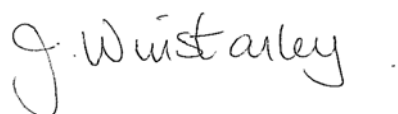
Financial resources are well managed. The proportion of operational staff working within children's social care services in relation to the population is significantly below that of similar councils and the national average. In recognition of the challenges to service delivery, during 2006/07 the council invested £2.5m in children's social care to address the capacity issues with further investment earmarked for 07/08. While it is too soon to judge the impact of the additional funding, the direction of travel is positive.

Area(s) for development

- Ensure that service provision reflects better and includes more fully the needs of black and minority ethnic communities.

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