

26 November 2007

Dr Carey Bennet
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Dear Dr Bennet

2007 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN ESSEX 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 published and internal reviews of the Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP), the evidence and briefings provided by Ofsted, other inspectorates and relevant bodies. Additional time was allowed for full scrutiny of the internal self-review when it became apparent that it had not been received in advance by the inspection team. We apologise for the inconvenience this has caused. 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

Essex County Council consistently delivers services for children and young people at an adequate level, but with some good features, particularly in relation to the scope and ambition of its strategic planning and its contribution to being healthy and making a positive contribution. These are balanced by weaker contributions to outcomes in the aspects of staying safe, enjoying and achieving and achieving economic well-being. The council is committed to working with partners to coordinate services for children, young people and families to ensure they are presented as seamless and coherent.

Being healthy

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The authority's contribution to outcomes in this aspect is good. The authority has established strong relationships with multi-agency planning groups contributing to health outcomes for children. Children's Centres include healthcare provision to meet

local need. Another strength is that children and young people adopt healthier lifestyles than in comparable authorities, according to inspection evidence.

The rate of teenage conceptions is lower than in comparable authorities and decreasing, although not on track to meet the national reduction target. In most Primary Care Trusts (PCTs), the incidence of smoking while pregnant is in line with that in similar areas. Infant mortality, perinatal mortality and the proportion of low birth weights are average in most PCTs. The few exceptions are below average and the trend in most PCTs is downward, reflecting the national trend. The proportion of mothers initiating breast-feeding is in line with comparable PCTs, but in most cases the trend is not as good. Immunisation rates are generally in line, but MMR rates are below average in Colchester.

Healthy Schools Status has been achieved by 33% of schools compared to a national average of 47%. However, a further 52% are currently participating in the scheme and this represents good progress on the local target. Many schools had previously participated in a local scheme, but not all have transferred to the national scheme. More teachers and nurses have achieved the Personal, Social and Health Education certification.

The percentage of looked after children who had annual health assessments and dental checks recorded has improved since last year and is now 74%, which is in line with comparable authorities, but below the national rate of 84%.

There has been some progress towards the provision of a comprehensive Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service, notably in developing: a full range of services for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities; services that are appropriate for 16- and 17-year-olds; and services for children and young people with complex needs. In the year to March 2007, some plans were in place but had not been fully implemented. For example, workers in non-specialist Tier 2 services are being integrated into the multidisciplinary 'teams around schools, children and communities' (TASCCs), which became active in September 2007.

Area for development

- Ensure that looked after children have annual dental and health checks to bring performance in line with the national average.

Staying safe

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The authority's contribution to outcomes in this aspect is adequate although performance is variable, particularly in referrals and assessments the operation of child protection procedures, and services for looked after children. Stronger performance is seen in the joint working by the Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB), the quality of child protection and safeguarding procedures in schools and the level of adoptions and family placements of looked after children

The LSCB works effectively with its counterparts in neighbouring Thurrock and Southend to develop common policies and joint training. It includes appropriate representation and has produced a clear set of priorities. The quality of information for parents, carers and children has improved, for example through dedicated sections on the LSCB website. The numbers of children and young people killed or seriously injured in road traffic accidents has declined but not as quickly as the national average. An effective protocol regarding domestic violence referrals has been agreed with the Police.

Inspection findings for safeguarding practice in schools are good overall. Eligibility criteria for the referral of children in need have yet to be published. Referrals of children in need and repeat referrals have both increased and are slightly above average. The proportion of referrals that lead to initial assessments has improved considerably from a low base, but is still below average. Only 46% of initial assessments were completed within seven days, which is well below comparator and national averages. However, performance for core assessments is in line. A good and significantly higher than average number of child protection assessments led to an initial conference within set timescales. Although all reviews for children on the Child Protection Register were undertaken, their timeliness has declined slightly. The number of children subject to a child protection plan or on the Child Protection Register has increased. All are allocated to a qualified social worker, with first-time registrations and re-registrations at an acceptable level.

Placement stability for looked after children has improved since last year and is now broadly in line with similar authorities and the national average. The number allocated to a qualified social worker has also increased but at 72% it is not as good as in similar authorities. However, the authority has continued to use a creative workforce strategy to mitigate the effects. The timeliness of case reviews has deteriorated with only 76% being held within timescales and is worse than in comparable authorities. In contrast, the proportions of looked after children who have been adopted and the timeliness of placements is good. A good and increasing proportion of looked after children are placed within their wider families. All relevant young people have a pathway plan. A Corporate Strategy Group and an Elected Members' Group have been established to address the issues concerning corporate parenting and services for looked after children.

The authority reports that up to 75% of young people with disabilities have a transition plan to support their move to adult services. This figure is lower than the national average. This issue is being addressed by the Transitions Coordination Team, which began work in January 2007 aimed at considering the needs of all young people in this group.

Areas for development

- Publish eligibility criteria for referrals of children in need.
- Ensure that initial assessments and reviews of looked after children are completed on time.

- Ensure all looked after children are allocated to qualified social workers.

Enjoying and achieving

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The authority's contribution to outcomes in this aspect is adequate. The strongest elements are boys' improving attainment in English, the impact of intensive support in primary schools, inspection outcomes in primary schools and early years settings, and the improving attainment of looked after children. Most of the areas for improvement relate to secondary provision.

Enjoyment of school is good or better in nearly all early years settings, primary schools and special schools, and in most secondary schools. However, the proportion of children and young people reporting that they always or usually try their best at school is lower in Essex than nationally. Absence from primary schools increased last year but not as much as in other similar authorities, and Essex is now in line with them. Secondary absence rates are higher than in comparable authorities.

The authority analyses outcomes effectively to identify groups whose performance is better or worse than expected. Most groups achieve in line with national expectations. This includes children from nearly all minority ethnic groups and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

At most stages of schooling, standards are in line with comparable authorities. Foundation Stage outcomes, which are moderated well by the authority, are below the national average. Key Stage 1 outcomes are mainly in line with comparable authorities and those seen nationally, but reading standards are above average and the standard of boys' writing is improving faster than nationally. Progress is therefore good in Key Stage 1.

By the end of Key Stage 2, standards are in line with those seen in comparable authorities and nationally. When contextual factors are taken into consideration, the progress of Essex children and young people in Key Stage 2 is average. However, the small national improvement in the percentage of children and young people reaching Level 4 in English was not matched in Essex.

Standards in core subjects at Key Stage 3 are average and improving. The proportions of children and young people reaching the Level 5 threshold are in line with comparable authorities. Over the last three years, these threshold figures have been improving slower than average in mathematics and science but faster than average in English, last year's dip in English notwithstanding.

Contextual value added measures of progress since age 11 show that children and young people aged 14 have progressed as well in Essex as similar children and young people do elsewhere, but that children and young people aged 16 have progressed a little less well. This reflects the findings of school inspections. Nevertheless, overall standards in secondary schools and the associated rates of improvement are in line with those seen in comparable authorities and nationally.

A priority in the CYPP is to improve standards in a targeted group of low achieving primary and secondary schools. The primary schools are broadly on track to make the anticipated improvement, showing that the authority's Intensive Support Programme is working well. Trends in attainment are generally positive and boys are catching up with girls in English. Intervention in the secondary schools has been less successful. For example, the number of schools where 92% or more gain five or more A*–G grades at GCSE has declined and some Essex schools did not meet the national floor target for five or more A*–C grades.

The progress and well-being of looked after children are now monitored through a 'virtual school' arrangement. The proportion gaining five or more A*–G grades has improved for three years running. There was a dramatic improvement last year in the proportion of looked after children entered for at least one qualification, and this improved figure has been sustained. The proportion gaining five or more A*–C grades fluctuates from year to year, but the trend is upward. However, attendance targets for looked after children have not been met.

The quality of early years education is generally good; teaching is a strength in full day care settings. The quality of provision in the Foundation Stage is in line with comparable authorities. In school inspections, primary schools generally fare better than secondary schools and better than primaries in similar authorities. Secondary children and young people's personal development and well-being, behaviour and enjoyment of school are lower than in similar authorities.

The authority monitors its schools well and is increasingly proactive in offering support to schools at risk of being judged inadequate. This support is usually welcomed, but two schools that were ultimately placed in Ofsted categories of concern had turned down the authority's earlier offers of support. Nevertheless, in the year to April 2007, nine of the authority's 80 secondary schools spent some time in Ofsted's categories of concern, including six in special measures, which is above average. This has affected approximately 12% of all its secondary children and young people. Support for schools in categories has often been good, despite weaknesses in the statements of action.

The management of school places has mostly been successful. Two secondary schools are due to close but others have considerable surplus spaces, including one quite recently opened. The authority is supporting school diversity including plans for academies, particularly in areas of underachievement, and trusts. However, the pace of change has meant that its overall strategy is not transparent. Permanent exclusions from secondary schools are less common than in comparable authorities. Provision for excluded students has improved since being highlighted in the last APA letter, but is still in the lowest quartile nationally.

Most schools provide good care, support and guidance, including meeting the needs of children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make good progress in most primary schools. In early years, intervention to meet needs is effective. There are strategies to improve recreational and leisure opportunities and additional

support to enable vulnerable students to enjoy and achieve. Special schools now track children and young people's progress closely and compare their performance against benchmarks based on several other local authorities. The authority and its special schools use data well to evaluate children and young people's progress, which in most cases is good.

Areas for development

- Reduce the number of secondary schools in categories of concern and ensure more effective take-up of support by schools judged inadequate.
- Ensure that secondary floor targets are met.
- Meet statutory requirements for the education of excluded children and young people.
- Reduce absence, particularly in secondary schools.
- Clarify the authority's strategy for developing school diversity.

Making a positive contribution

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The authority's contribution to outcomes in this aspect is good. The strongest elements are the involvement of young people in decision making, the tailoring of children's centres to meet local needs, the range of support programmes for different vulnerable groups, the reduction in first-time offending and the use of restorative justice principles to prevent repeat offending.

Newly registered child care meets most national standards but not always those concerning equal opportunities arrangements. Child care provision is expanding and good progress has been made in establishing children's centres. The authority has shown ambition in finding bespoke solutions in each locality, rather than imposing a common pattern which has led to some innovative practice.

The Youth Service plays a significant role in personal and social development and has improved its contact with hard-to-reach groups, such as Travellers. It engages with over a quarter of all teenagers, which meets the national target. Children and young people are well supported in their social and emotional development by nearly all primary schools and most secondary schools. Children and young people are given many opportunities to work together, develop responsibility and to show concern for other people and for the environment. A specialist support team is working intensively with selected schools to improve behaviour. Special schools enable children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to make a good contribution to their immediate community.

Considerable efforts have been made to involve young people in decision-making, and in designing and evaluating local services. The Young Essex Assembly provides a voice for young people. Most schools have school councils and are improving their responsiveness to children and young people's views. The proportion of looked after children and care leavers who contribute to their reviews by talking about their feelings and opinions has risen, but not as fast as in similar areas.

Programmes to improve attitudes among all young people are developing, and the anti-bullying strategy is well established. However, the evaluation of these programmes tends to focus on the impact on the immediate recipients rather than the wider implications, such as the potential for building capacity. Young people are encouraged to make a positive contribution to the community, for example through the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme. There are programmes to support parents, offenders, those at risk of offending, young people who have had traumatic experiences, and those who find it difficult to form good relationships. First time offending has been significantly reduced with quarterly numbers being around 25% lower than the corresponding quarter a year ago. Restorative justice principles are becoming embedded in day-to-day practice. Re-offending is below average, though not on track to meet the government's 5% reduction target. There has been a further decrease in offending by looked after children and young people.

The Transitions Board has now been running since January 2007. It supports young people and their families and carers effectively through periods of transition. Children's services continue to take a holistic approach to the welfare of young people, for example considering employment and education as well as housing for those leaving care, and taking account of emotional and social well-being.

Area for development

- Improve the strategic value of small scale programmes and initiatives by ensuring they have wider benefits, such as increasing capacity.

Achieving economic well-being

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The authority's contribution to outcomes in this aspect is adequate. The strongest elements are the standards in advanced General Certificate of Education/Vocational Certificate of Education (GCE/VCE) courses in schools and sixth form colleges, the development of partnerships within the 14-19 strategy, and the quality of care, support and guidance in most schools. Strong promotion of the Education Maintenance Allowance has led to very good take-up among those who are entitled.

The proportion of young people aged 16-18 not in education, employment or training (NEET) is better than the national average but not as good as similar authorities. Although the rate of improvement is good, the proportion of teenage mothers who continue in education, employment or training remains low.

By the age of 19, 44% of young people have achieved a Level 3 qualification and 70% have achieved Level 2, broadly in line with the national average and similar authorities. Attainment on advanced GCE and VCE courses in schools and sixth form colleges is above average and improving. However, a minority of secondary school inspections judged that students were not satisfactorily developing skills that would secure their future economic well-being.

The curriculum in most secondary schools meets the range of needs and interests of learners well and the range of vocational pathways continues to grow. Collaboration between the authority and the local Learning and Skills Council and among schools and colleges in the 14-19 partnerships is making a wider range of alternative education available. However, some schools have a minority of young people, predominantly boys, whose alternative education programmes include few qualifications. Information about 14-19 provision is provided through a dedicated website, but the quality has been variable. A few providers give very good information but others provide just course titles or nothing at all. This lack of consistency and completeness limits the website's effectiveness. Other aspects of guidance are usually good. A disappointing feature of the last year has been the failure to win approval to offer specialist diplomas.

A Transitions Coordination Team started work during the year to support young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities although it is too soon to see the impact of this initiative yet. Health and children's services work together to support children with particular needs, and most young people's views are considered in reviews. All looked after children have pathway and transition plans and those leaving care have a named care worker. This is helping to improve the transition to adult services and contributing to improved participation in post-16 education, employment and training for care leavers.

A partnership with the Prince's Trust and Connexions helps care leavers who live in supported lodgings to find suitable employment, education or training. The proportion of care leavers at age 19 who are living in suitable accommodation fell in 2005-06 and remains below average in 2006-07. However, the authority is working with district councils to improve accommodation options for vulnerable young people. There are effective mechanisms to monitor the progress of vulnerable students aged 16-24 and some informal monitoring beyond.

Areas for development

- Increase the proportion of young teenage mothers in education, employment or training.
- Ensure effectiveness of transition arrangements for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

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

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The authority's capacity to improve its services for children and young people is adequate. The authority shows vision and ambition in its strategic planning and is keen to stress the potential for further improvement as new ways of working become established. The strategy is ambitious, not least because of the size of the authority, and the necessarily complex planning.

A detailed self-assessment document was shared with partners and circulated to members of the Children and Young People's Strategic Board. It includes several case studies and evaluates progress in detail, giving a clearer explanation for the authority's decisions on prioritisation. However, it does not provide a systematic review of current and previous performance in relation to well-defined performance measures. Where performance has declined or action has not had the intended benefit, the review does not always say so explicitly. Consequently, it does not provide a rigorous evaluation of the reasons for the decline or identify the lessons learnt. Part of the problem is that some of the success criteria in the original Children and Young People's Plan are too vague, a problem that is also apparent in many of the authority's statements of action for schools placed in categories of concern.

Performance management operates at several levels, and performance contracts are linked, via the directorate plan, to the overarching Corporate Plan. Elected members are involved in monitoring performance via their scrutiny and corporate parenting functions. Performance indicators in the Corporate Plan derive from the Children and Young People's Plan. The Corporate Plan targets are monitored on a monthly basis and are reported quarterly to the Children and Young People's Strategic Board. Service agreements have been introduced to local Children and Young People's Strategic Partnerships.

Workforce reorganisation and development has been good, with most services being at least maintained through a period of transition. The authority has undertaken major changes in organisational structure and expanded the senior management team through new recruitment. However, the impact of these changes is yet to be seen. Teacher vacancy rates are consistent with similar authorities, but schools in some areas have difficulty in attracting high quality staff. Social care vacancies and turnover have been reduced, but remain higher than in comparable authorities. The authority has adopted a workforce strategy to address these issues.

Gross expenditure on services for children and families is slightly below that of comparator authorities, whilst expenditure on both family support services and services for looked after children is slightly higher. Joint commissioning arrangements are in place for some services, although there has been limited pooling of budgets. Despite a higher level of investment in children's social care training, fewer staff have attended courses and fewer have received relevant awards, contrary to the national trend.

Overall, the authority has not demonstrated an improving and sustained track record of performance across all outcomes. Staying safe has remained adequate for a two year period. Outcomes for some vulnerable groups have improved, but for the year April 2006 to March 2007, insufficient progress has been made for most children and young people.

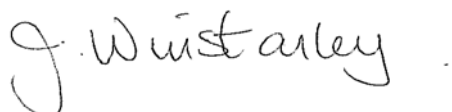
In summary, the authority has a number of plans and initiatives, notably the introduction of localised multidisciplinary teams with devolved budgets, but they have yet to deliver improved outcomes. Although self-evaluation is more detailed in the internal self-assessment document, weaknesses in defining success criteria and establishing suitable performance indicators make rigorous evaluation difficult. The available data show that performance is in line with comparable authorities.

Areas for development

- Further improve recruitment and retention.
- Ensure that future plans are clear, succinct and measurable enough to mark progress.

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 "J. Winstanley".

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager
Local Services Inspection