

26 November 2007

Mr P Morgan
Director of Children's Services
Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council
East Wing Floor 2
The Exchange
Ainsworth Street
Blackburn BB1 6AD

Dear Mr Morgan

2007 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN BLACKBURN WITH DARWEN 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 3

Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council consistently delivers above minimum requirements. The council has responded positively to the areas for improvement identified in last year's annual performance assessment and has made good progress since that time, particularly in improving staying safe outcomes. It has been successful in ensuring that services and departments work well together and partnerships with other agencies are strong, with shared ambitions and priorities encapsulated in the Local Area Agreement. The council has successfully engaged children and young people in strategic planning and there is increasing participation by vulnerable groups. Outcomes for children and young people are good in each of the five outcome areas of the *Every child matters* agenda. The council's capacity to improve further is good.

Being healthy

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 area is good.

The council and the Primary Care Trust have combined well to deliver preventative health care through the children's centres across the borough and this has increased take up of universal services. Immunisation rates and levels of breast-feeding are higher than in similar councils. Breast-feeding has increased as a result of successful projects delivered through Sure Start and children's centres.

There are significantly high levels of dental decay among children in Blackburn with Darwen, where the rate of tooth decay in five year olds is amongst the worst in England. This is identified as an area for improvement in the Local Area Agreement. The council and partners have developed a new oral health strategy. As a result, targeted commissioning of dental services is now improving access to dentists and there is good provision for looked after children and young people, and children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

The council recognises that schools have a key role in encouraging children and young people to adopt healthy lifestyles and has made the Healthy Schools programme a priority. The proportion of schools that have achieved the National Healthy Schools Standard is higher than average and ahead of target, and the percentage of children and young people participating in sport for two hours or more per week, exceeded the target in 2006. The Blackburn with Darwen Schools Sports Partnership is recognised as high achieving by the Youth Sport Trust.

Teenage conception rates are lower than the average for statistical neighbours and the reduction of 18% from the 1998 baseline is better than the national average. Rates are significantly for some groups and services are targeted to hotspots and to vulnerable groups of young people. The council has been successful in helping teenage mothers into education, training and employment.

There is a joint commissioning approach to substance misuse and sexual health based on risk assessment. Treatment is offered through Lifeline. The latest data reveal that the proportion of those in treatment who are under 18 is higher than average, indicating that the partnership has been relatively successful in getting young people into treatment. The Children and Young People's Plan Review highlights smoking as a significant problem in the borough. Smoking cessation and education sessions are running in six high schools and colleges and the service directly supported 182 young people during the year.

The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) provides good outcomes for children and young people, with short waiting times, and improving Tier 1 and 2 provision. Blackburn with Darwen has recently set up its own CAMHS board independently of Lancashire. The service is not yet at the stage reached in most other areas, and the main focus for development is in services for young people with complex mental health needs. The service is able to access CAMHS wards in neighbouring East Lancashire and has been successful in restricting the need to use inpatient services.

A high proportion of looked after children and young people received an annual health assessment in 2006-07. Performance improved from that achieved in 2005-06 and remains better than the average for councils in England. The appointment of a psychologist to work with looked after children and young people and carers has contributed well to improving health outcomes for this group.

Areas for development

- Reduce the high levels of dental decay among children.
- Further development of CAMHS strategy and CAMHS provision.

Staying safe

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 area is good. This is a significant improvement from last year's annual performance assessment.

The council arranges fire safety checks and free smoke detectors for homes, with fire safety training targeted to primary schools. Road safety training and traffic calming methods have contributed to reductions in the number of children and young people killed or seriously injured in road traffic accidents; the council is on track to achieve the Government target for reduction by 2010.

The Children and Young People's Plan includes reducing suffering from bullying and discrimination as one of its priorities for action. A reporting and monitoring system was introduced in all schools in March 2006 and this is enabling the borough to establish baselines for the frequency of bullying and discrimination in schools. A range of programmes is offered to enable children and young people to gain a greater awareness of bullying and to develop positive approaches.

The high rate of referrals of children and young people in need was an area for improvement in the 2006 annual performance assessment and the council has conducted a comprehensive review of its duty and assessment processes. It has introduced improved systems reinforced with training, and has increased the capacity of the duty and assessment team with specialist front line workers, extra social workers, a health worker and a benefits advisor. This has resulted in significant improvements including a reduced rate of referrals; more assessments completed within prescribed timescales, an increased proportion of core assessments undertaken and better quality core assessments. There is a culture of strong performance within the team as a result of strengthened internal quality assurance systems and regular audits by the local safeguarding children's board.

The proportion of children and young people in Blackburn with Darwen on the Child Protection Register is lower than the average in similar councils. This is a long term trend. However, the rate of initial child protection conferences held during the year was in line with the average indicating that children at risk are having a full

assessment of their needs. The child protection system is well managed with all cases reviewed on time and prompt action is taken to cease registration safely. A robust family support system ensures that multi-agency support continues as long as it is needed. The council has invested heavily in universal support and early intervention and during the year opened six new children's centres bringing the total to 12.

The rate of children and young people looked after has decreased during 2006-07 but remains slightly higher than the average rate in similar councils. The main reason is the large number of children and young people on a care order who are placed with parents. A protocol for care order discharge has been agreed with the Family Court Judge, and the Children and Family Court Advisory Service. Arrangements to manage discharges are in place but small numbers have been processed to date.

Outcomes for looked after children and young people are generally good with high performance on reviews completed on time, placing the council in the top quartile nationally on this measure, and a higher than average proportion of looked after children and young people living in family placements. In March 2006 less than 75% of looked after children and young people had a named qualified social worker. On 31 March 2007 this had improved to more than 92%. The council explains that in March 2007 all looked after children and young people were allocated to a qualified worker but in some cases newly appointed managers were continuing to work with children and young people in the short term for best practice reasons. As levels of qualified staff have increased the council does not anticipate any future difficulty in allocating looked after children and young people. The proportion of care leavers identified as living in suitable accommodation had declined in 2006 and was a key area for improvement in the annual performance assessment. During 2006-07 the council has completed its review of leaving care services which has led to many improved outcomes for this group. For example, all care leavers have a pathway plan and the proportion living in suitable accommodation has increased and is now in line with the average.

Children and young people of Asian heritage are significantly underrepresented among those on the Child Protection Register or looked after, and among those receiving family support services. The concern is that identification of need in this group is not sufficiently developed. The council is investigating the reasons for this and is seeking assistance from mosques and madrassas in this respect.

Areas for development

- Continue to investigate why Black and minority ethnic groups are underrepresented in targeted services for children in need.

Enjoying and achieving

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 area is good.

From very low starting points most children and young people make better progress than expected. In 2006 the council recorded its best ever results particularly at Key Stage 3, where Level 5 trends in English, mathematics and science were well above those found in statistical neighbours. Performance continues to improve at GCSE with no secondary school below the 30% floor target. Some 52.7% of pupils achieved five or more GCSEs at grade A* to C in 2006, an 8% rise since 2004. The performance of Pakistani learners at GCSE continues to improve with 30.3% gaining five or more GCSEs at grade A* to C in 2006. Progress measures across the key stages are favourable with Key Stages 2 to 4 above that found nationally. However, performance at Key Stage 1 in national tests remains weaker with falls at L2B+ in reading and writing. Nonetheless, the trend of improvement in mathematics in this key stage is above that found nationally.

Outcomes for looked after children and young people are positive and improving. Some 61.9% attained at least one GCSE A* to G in 2006 compared with 55% nationally and 53% in statistical neighbours. Furthermore, the proportion of looked after children and young people missing at least 25 days of schooling for any reason has declined from 2004/05. Overall attendance figures for all children and young people are in line with national and statistical neighbours and unauthorised absences are lower. Exclusion rates are broadly in line. The council's provision for permanently excluded pupils is placed in the best quartile nationally in 2004/05 and shows an improving trend.

The majority of schools are judged by Ofsted to be good or better and, overall, children and young people are positive about their schooling. The council challenges schools well to encourage continuous improvement and raise attainment. The two primary schools in an Ofsted category of concern are on schedule to be removed. Children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are judged to make good or outstanding progress in the main. Schools comment favourably about the effectiveness of support for pupils with English as an additional language and the planning of provision for pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The number of new statements fell between 2004 and 2006 at a much faster rate than nationally. The percentage of new statements prepared within the 18 week timescale is in the best quartile nationally.

The quality of early years childcare and education provision is good. The council ensures early years is given high priority, is based on strong partnerships and is effective in promoting children's development. Good arrangements are in place to ensure providers are on course to meet the requirements of the early years Foundation Stage in September 2008. Although attainment on entry to schools remains very low, the good provision children receive enables them to make effective

progress in meeting early learning goals. Good progress has been made in developing integrated children's centres, with all twelve situated within the most disadvantaged areas in the borough. Good support for those with additional needs is offered through family support services.

The council has an effective strategy in place to deliver the play policy. One of its main drives to increase engagement in recreation and play has been the Beez card. The number of active Junior Beez cards has risen to almost 10,000 as a result of an effective publicity campaign. Attendance at special cultural, leisure and sport events during 2006 summer holidays was almost 5,000 above target.

Areas for development

- Raise standards in reading and writing at Key Stage 1.
- Build on recent improvements to further raise achievement by Black and minority ethnic groups.

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 area is good.

Children and young people are supported effectively in developing socially and emotionally. Young carers are particularly well supported to help them prepare for some of the future challenges they will face. The Listening to Young Carers group has produced a DVD sharing their stories which has been shown to all children's services staff. There is good support to help children and young people to make transitions at all stages from early years, through school, and on to further education training or employment. The proportion of children and young people with disabilities who had a transition plan has improved in 2006-07 to over 90%, which is better than the average.

Children and young people were widely consulted about the priorities in the Children and Young People's Plan and have participated in planning services, and in the commissioning of sexual health and substance misuse services. Young people organised the Stamp Out Bullying conference during the year, and are routinely involved in staff recruitment. There is a high and increasing turnout in the youth parliament elections, and children and young people across the borough can make their views known through Pupil Voice and school councils. A Young Muslim Leadership Project has been established jointly by Blackburn with Darwen and Bolton councils to increase the voice of young Muslim people in the North West. The project provides opportunities for this group to share their views with MPs, councillors, and local strategic partnerships.

The Positive Activities for Children and Young People multi-agency programme is designed to deter children and young people from offending and anti-social

behaviour, while Youth Inclusion Support Panels provide early interventions with those identified as most at risk. The Youth Offending Team has been successful in reducing offending and re-offending rates, but there has been limited progress in helping young offenders into education, training or employment. The ratio of looked after children and young people who receive a final warning, reprimand or conviction compared with the general population is higher than in similar councils, and increased in 2006-07. The council is considering introducing restorative justice practices in residential and foster homes. This approach is already operating successfully in some schools.

Participation of looked after children and young people in reviews increased slightly during the year and at 90% is better than the national average. The council aims to continue improving performance and is investigating electronic communication as a means of consultation. A new consultation leaflet, designed by looked after children and young people, was launched in July 2006.

Areas for development

- Improve access to education, training and employment for young people who have offended.
- Introduce restorative justice practices for looked after children and young people in order to reduce the number who may offend.

Achieving economic well-being

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 area is good.

A wide range of childcare provision is available. Nearly one thousand new childcare places have been created, including 68% in disadvantaged wards. This exceeds the Children and Young People's Plan target. There is good access to effective programmes of adult and community learning and family learning through the children's centres and a number of secondary schools. Eight outreach service advisors work with Jobcentre Plus and other agencies providing effective links with the Children's Information Services.

Employment opportunities in the borough are improving. The proportion of young people completing Year 11 who then continue in learning, the number of young people completing an apprenticeship, the NVQ success rate for all work-based learners living in the area and aged under 19 at the start of their programme, are better than those found nationally.

A key success of the council is the overall reduction in young people not in education, employment or training. This has declined over a three year period and is below that found nationally and in statistical neighbours. Vulnerable young people receive particular attention. For example, the Local Public Service Board has co-

funded work with CAMHS to meet the needs of young people not in education, employment or training with mental health issues. A most notable impact of the council's work has been the increase in the percentage of care leavers in education, training or employment, up to 70% in March 2007 compared with just 31% in April 2006. The impact of the What Makes a Difference Worker has been seen through new approaches to education, training or employment for care leavers and co-location of the Leaving Care Team with Connexions.

Strong partnerships typify the 14–19 strategy and an effective infrastructure is in place. The inclusion strategy is strong with an increase in the percentage of 16- to 18-year-olds gaining level 2 qualifications. Further improvements identified in the strategy include increasing the number of 16-year-olds staying in learning, improving the number of care leavers in employment, education or training and ensuring the majority of pupils identified as gifted and talented participate in education and training after the age of 16. Employer satisfaction questionnaires show 79% satisfaction rates in 2006 and 90% in 2007. However, the council recognises that 19 year olds do not achieve as well in terms of Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications. Nonetheless, teaching and learning in the 14 to 19 age range is judged by Ofsted as good overall. Inspection reports show that programmes and the curriculum meet external requirements well and are responsive to local circumstances. Young people are positive about future options.

Housing and regeneration services work effectively with other agencies, for example with health visitors, school nurses and education welfare teams, when families with young children are placed in homeless or temporary accommodation. The Youth Housing Strategy Group has developed new approaches to ensure care leavers and other vulnerable young people have safe, high quality accommodation options. A very positive feature is the zero length of stay in B&B accommodation in the years 2003-04 to 2005-06.

Area for development

- Improve achievement of 19-year-olds.

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. The council and partners share common objectives and targets which are specified clearly in the Children and Young People's Plan and its review, and work cooperatively to achieve their ambitions for children and young people in the borough. There is strong leadership and good corporate support for improving children's services with good progress made on areas for improvement identified in the 2006 annual performance assessment, particularly in staying safe outcomes. Effective performance management ensures the council is aware of areas for

continued improvement. Improvement plans are clear and measurable and have been drawn up after extensive consultation with stakeholders.

Partnership and collaborative working is a real strength of the council. There is strong partnership with the voluntary, community, and faith sectors. These sectors are represented on all children's services development groups. The council has had some success engaging with the Muslim community and work in conjunction with a local mosque has contributed to improved educational outcomes. Nonetheless, it recognises that the representation of minority ethnic groups is not as wide as it could be and this remains a significant challenge.

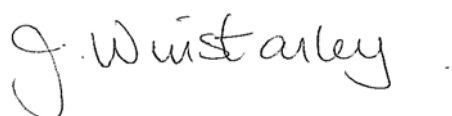
The council has improved capacity with 11 additional qualified social worker posts created during the year, representing a 33% increase in qualified social work staff, and has been successful in reducing the number of vacant posts. Overall, financial management is good and resources are well-directed to priorities with particular emphasis on preventative services.

Area for development

- Increase active representation of Black and minority ethnic groups in strategic planning groups and build on the successful examples of engagement with the local Muslim 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 blue ink that reads "Juliet Winstanley".

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager
Local Services Inspection