

17 December 2008

Mr David Brown
Executive Director for Children's Services
Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council
Room 39
The Council House
Lichfield Street
Walsall
WS1 1TW

Dear Mr Brown

Annual performance assessment of services for children and young people in Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council 2008

This letter summarises the findings of the 2008 annual performance assessment (APA) for your council. The evaluations and judgements in the letter draw on a range of data and information which covers the period 1 April 2007 to 31 March 2008. As you know, the APA is not based on an inspection of your services and, therefore, can only provide a snapshot based on the evidence considered. As such, I am grateful to you for assuring the quality of the data provided.

Performance is judged on a four point scale as detailed in the handbook.

I should emphasise that the grades awarded are based on an overall 'best fit' model. For instance, an outstanding judgement of Grade 4 reflects that overall most aspects, but not necessarily all, of the services in the area are working very well. We know that one of the features of outstanding provision is the drive for greater improvement and no council would suggest, and nor would Ofsted, that a judgement of outstanding indicates that everything is perfect. Similarly within a judgement of inadequate overall, Grade 1, there could be some aspects of the overall service that are adequate or even good. Judgements are made in a rounded way, balancing all of the evidence and giving due consideration to outcomes, local and national contexts, priorities and decision-making.

The following table sets out the grades awarded for performance in 2008.

Assessment judgement area	APA grade
Overall effectiveness of children's services	3
Being healthy	3
Staying safe	3
Enjoying and achieving	3
Making a positive contribution	3
Achieving economic well-being	2
Capacity to improve, including the management of services for children and young people	3

*Inspectors make judgements based on the following scale
4: outstanding/excellent; 3: good; 2: adequate; 1: inadequate*

Overall effectiveness of children's services

Grade 3

Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council, in partnership with Education Walsall, provides services that consistently deliver above minimum requirements for most children and young people. The council's capacity to improve, including its management of services is good. The council has made good progress in responding to the recommendations of the 2007 APA and there is clear evidence of improvement. For example, the number of initial assessments completed within agreed timescales for children in need has noticeably increased to above similar councils and national levels.

The combined work of all local services has ensured that outcomes for health, safety, making a positive contribution and enjoying and achieving remain good. Provision and take up of health services for looked after children are consistently good and well above similar councils. The high priority given to enjoying and achieving outcomes is narrowing the gap between the performance of children and young people in Walsall and the national average. The overall trend of improvement for standards achieved at ages 7, 11 and 14 exceeds that in similar councils and the national trend. The council is aware of the need to continue raising standards at the age of 16.

Economic well-being outcomes are adequate overall as identified by many performance indicators which point to outcomes that are in line with or below similar councils. Some improvements have taken place, but have yet to make a sustained impact in all performance indicators. In contrast, some improvements have been faster than those seen in similar councils and nationally. For example the percentage of young people completing an apprenticeship has increased significantly and is now better than in similar councils.

The council and its partners provide good leadership for children's services. Together they demonstrate a strong ambition for improving the life chances of children and young people, including those who are most vulnerable.

Being healthy

Grade 3

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. The council's analysis of its strengths and areas for development for this outcome area is consistent with the evidence.

Major strengths

- Strong partnerships have contributed to good and improving health outcomes for most children and young people from a low base. Healthy lifestyles are well supported and 85% of pupils receive two hours PE and sport each week. This is above the national target and Walsall is now one of the top three in the West Midlands for the take up of infant immunisations, including MMR rates at above 90%.

- There is a range of innovative approaches to sex and relationship education in schools and a pilot Family Nurse Partnership provides excellent support for vulnerable first-time young parents. Although the most recent figures show a slight rise in teenage conceptions the overall trend since 1998 is reducing at a faster rate than similar councils and nationally.
- There is excellent provision and take up of health services for looked after children including good access to child and adolescent mental health services for this group.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- High and rising rates of infant mortality over the past four years.
- Proportion of mothers initiating breast-feeding remains below comparators.

Staying safe

Grade 3

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. The council's analysis of its strengths and areas for development for this outcome area is consistent with the evidence.

Major strengths

- A strong drive to re-focus services to earlier prevention, assessment and support is leading to good and improving outcomes for children. The common assessment framework (CAF) and Team Around the Child models of service provision are increasingly well embedded and underpin effective inter-agency assessment and care planning.
- All indicators relating to looked after children and young people demonstrate continuing strong performance to promote their welfare, compared with similar councils and national averages.
- The local safeguarding children board is well-established and has made good progress on tackling identified priorities including working with faith communities. Serious case reviews have clear action plans leading to improved services.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- Respite care facilities are not yet adequate to meet the needs of children with disabilities and their families.
- Children with a child protection plan or who are looked after do not always receive home visits within required timescales.

Enjoying and achieving

Grade 3

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. The council's analysis of its strengths and areas for development for this outcome area is consistent with the evidence.

Major strengths

- The performance of children in early years settings has continued to improve with good support from Education Walsall advisory services. The proportion of funded nursery education in childcare settings judged to be good or better is above the national average.
- A good level of support and challenge has contributed positively to the overall trend of improvement in standards at Key Stages 1 and 2. The rate of improvement is greater than similar councils and the national trend. Reading standards at Key Stage 1 are above similar councils and in line with the national average.
- The rate of improvement in mathematics and science standards at Key Stage 3 is greater than similar councils and the national trend.
- A strong approach to corporate parenting has led to higher attainment for young people leaving care. The percentage of young people leaving care with at least one GCSE is above similar councils and the national average.
- The attendance of school-aged children and young people who have been looked after for at least 12 months has continued to improve and is above similar councils and the national average.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- Key Stage 4 results have been slow to rise, in comparison with statistical neighbours and national figures. In 2007, the percentage of students achieving five or more A* to C GCSEs fell to below similar councils and well below the national average and the overall rate of progress made by students was below average.

Making a positive contribution

Grade 3

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. The council's analysis of its strengths and areas for development for this outcome area is consistent with the evidence.

Major strengths

- Mechanisms to consult children and young people are well-developed with clear evidence of impact and there are a number of successful initiatives which encourage their participation and involvement. For example, an effective anti-bullying strategy has been informed by pupils' views and an increasing number

now report that they would talk to someone about their concerns.

- A strong commitment to inclusion is reflected in high and rising numbers of looked after children who are contributing to the reviews of their own care plans. Performance in this area has been further improved in 2007/08 and remains above comparators.
- The percentage of young people aged 13 to 19 accessing youth provision is consistently above similar councils and national levels and continues to rise.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- Formalised links for children and young people who are looked after, with senior managers, and elected members are at an early stage.
- The proportion of young offenders in education, employment and training (EET) remains consistently below similar councils and national rates.

Achieving economic well-being

Grade 2

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate. The council's analysis of its strengths and areas for development in this outcome area underestimate a number of important weaknesses and overvalue the areas where progress has been made. The table below sets out the evidence for the grade awarded.

Major strengths

- Effective partnership working has led to a significant increase in the proportion of young people completing an apprenticeship. Performance in this area is now above similar councils.
- Multi-agency professionals carefully monitor the progress of looked after young people and actively encourage them to engage in EET opportunities. The percentage of looked after young people age 16 who are in EET remains above similar councils and national levels.
- The support available for care leavers is good. The percentage of care leavers who have a pathway plan and personal advisor has remained well above similar councils and national figures.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- Despite improvements the percentage of young people achieving Level 2 and 3 qualifications remains below similar councils.
- The proportion of 16- to 18-year-olds who are not in education, employment and training (NEET), including those from minority ethnic groups is above similar councils and the national level.

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

Grade 3

The council's capacity to improve its services for children and young people, including its management of these services is good. The Director of Children's Services, senior managers and councillors provide strong and effective leadership. The council responds positively to external evaluation and challenge and has responded quickly and successfully to most of the recommendations of the 2007 APA and the JAR that was published in June 2008. For instance, they have recently increased the capacity of the workforce to address issues raised in the JAR regarding statutory visits to children who have a child protection plan and who are looked after. A revised 14–19 strategy has also been developed and approved in liaison with a range of partners and stakeholders. Good capacity is also evident in the rate of improvement in outcomes for enjoying and achieving.

The children and young people's plan is clearly focused on meeting the needs of children and young people, including the needs of vulnerable groups in all five outcomes. As a result of continuous self-review and regular consultation with children, young people and the voluntary and community sector, priorities are clear, ambitious and reflect local needs. Performance data has been used well to target resources towards areas of relative weakness. Self-evaluation is accurate, although the self-assessment grade in respect of economic well-being is not consistent with the evidence. The evaluation for this outcome does not always make full use of the information available to accurately assess the impact of council services on young people and how performance in this outcome compares with similar councils. For example, while the percentage of 16- to 18-year-olds re-engaging in employment, education or training has increased, insufficient attention is given to the increase in the proportion of 16- to 18-year-olds from minority ethnic groups who are NEET.

Overall, there is a good track record of service improvement. The strong and determined leadership of the council and the effective working partnerships are continuing to improve outcomes for children and young people in Walsall.

Major strengths

- Good ambition and strong leadership is leading to continuing improvements across most areas.
- A clear commitment to improving outcomes for children and young people has led to strong partnership working. This includes effective liaison with the voluntary and community sector so that local needs are well-reflected in improvement priorities.
- The council and its partners are open to and respond positively to challenge in order to improve performance. In general, good use has been made of performance data and resources and to take swift action, target specific areas of weakness and monitor progress.

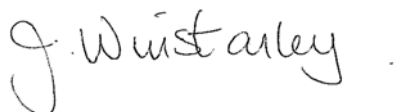
Important weaknesses and areas for development

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ In a small number of areas performance remains or has declined to below similar council comparators. |
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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.

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.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Juliet Winstanley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a period at the end.

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager, Local Services Inspection