

26 November 2007

Ms Hilary Pitts
Group Director of Children's Services
Swindon Borough Council
Sanford House
Sanford Street
Swindon
SN1 1QH

Dear Ms Pitts

2007 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN SWINDON BOROUGH 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, your action plan arising from the joint area review and the evidence and briefings provided by Ofsted, other inspectorates and relevant bodies. Additional notes provided by you in relation to Staying Safe, and Enjoying and Achieving were also considered. The letter comments on progress since the recent joint area review. 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

Swindon Borough Council delivers services for children and young people at an adequate level. The council's contribution to improving outcomes for children and young people is at least adequate in services across the five outcomes and some services are good. Children's services are working very effectively with partners to enable all children and young people to lead healthy lives and make a positive contribution with good effect on reducing anti-social behaviour and crime. Some of the good progress in improving achievement in schools noted in the 2006 joint area review has been maintained. Overall attainment is adequate in Key Stages 2 to 4 and there is still underachievement in some secondary schools. It is too soon to see the effects of some well-planned developments to improve attainment further. Services enabling children and young people to remain safe are adequate. Although good progress has been made to implement the recommendations from the joint area review this has yet to have a full impact in this area, which remains adequate overall.

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. There were no recommendations from the joint area review for improving outcomes for health. The council and the Primary Care Trust (PCT) are working together effectively and making good use of data to ensure that resources are well targeted. Smoking during pregnancy is reducing well and the proportion of mothers initiating breast-feeding has increased and is well above that of similar authorities. Immunisations are also at a good level. Health inequalities have been identified. For example, the number of babies with a low birth weight is higher than average, as is infant mortality. Services are working together to narrow the gaps and innovative methods are being used to target young people in vulnerable groups. The rate of teenage pregnancies has fallen considerably in the last year, but there is not a consistent downward trend. The multi-agency approach to tackling this issue has now been strengthened and access to services is being improved. Almost all schools are participating in the national Healthy Schools Programme and progress is ahead of target.

The council continues to give high priority to the promotion of mental health. The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) is performing well and access to specialist help is timely and faster than the national average. Substance misuse services are improving. Raising awareness of the service across agencies has resulted in increased referrals and provided opportunities for earlier intervention. The number of health assessments for looked after children continues to be at a very high level. Looked after children have fast access to CAMHS, and foster carers and adopters are given good support in understanding and managing behaviour.

Areas for development

- Continue to tackle inequalities in health outcomes regarding low birth weight babies and infant mortality.
- Establish a consistent downward trend in the level of teenage pregnancy.

Staying safe

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate, with a number of strengths. There were no recommendations from the joint area review for improving outcomes for staying safe. The joint area review did identify areas of weak performance but found that generally agencies worked well together and were improving outcomes for children. This improvement has been maintained in many areas.

Most children and young people say they feel safe in the area, and in and around school. Successful action has been taken to reduce the number of children killed or seriously injured on the roads by 41% from the baseline figure. There is continued very good performance for reviews of children on the child protection register, and a high number of core assessments are completed in a timely way. All care leavers have personal advisers and a higher than average number have pathway plans.

The council has responded well to the findings of the joint area review and has continued to work effectively with its partners to develop multi-agency working. The implementation of Local Preventative Groups is improving planning and support for vulnerable children and improving access to services. Early intervention through use of the common assessment framework and work on thresholds with schools and other agencies has been effective and has led, for example, to a reduction in the referral rate, which is now just above the national average. Similarly, repeat referrals have reduced to 23%, which is similar to the national average, and this downward trend is continuing. The number of initial assessments is increasing but is still lower than for most councils, and the number of core assessments is particularly low. Whilst there is evidence of good impact by the council in some areas, there is more to do to continue to ensure that thresholds are at an appropriate level and to review the number of referrals that lead to assessments.

Child protection registrations and re-registrations have increased and are now above national averages. The timeliness of child protection conferences has reduced and is consistently lower than in most councils. The council reports that this issue has now been addressed. All children on the child protection register had their reviews on time and have an allocated social worker, representing good performance. The Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) is being well led and is actively promoting safeguarding in the community. The progress of serious case reviews has a high profile at the meetings and learning from reviews is shared across agencies. The council reports that the number of looked after children is reducing but it is still at a relatively high level. The number of reviews undertaken on time has increased to a satisfactory level. A low number of children experienced three or more placements in a year but longer-term placement stability has deteriorated. The council has investigated this issue and consequently is developing targeted preventative work, particularly with teenagers. The council is also looking to increase the number of in-house foster carers. The inspection of the fostering service reported good outcomes for keeping children safe. The inspection of the adoption service found some inconsistent practice but this has now been addressed. Permanency planning is effective with a good number of looked after children being adopted and the council is addressing the delays in the process during 2006–07 and reports a recent improvement. Over 90% of young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have a transition plan, which represents continued good performance.

Areas for development

- Review the referral and assessment process to ensure that referrals and assessments are at appropriate levels.

- Review the increase in child protection registrations and re-registrations to ensure that the action taken is appropriate.
- Continue to develop the preventative agenda and reduce the number of looked after children.
- Improve the longer-term placement stability for looked after children.
- Improve the performance in adoptions of looked after children once a decision for adoption has been made.

Enjoying and achieving

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate. No recommendations emerged from the joint area review.

Children achieve well in the Foundation Stage and at Key Stage 1. For this group the gap in performance between boys and girls is being reduced well. At Key Stage 2 attainment is improving and is now broadly in line with similar areas. At Key Stages 3 and 4 results have improved and the gap with the results nationally is beginning to reduce, although this is in the early stages. These improvements reflect the positive interventions made by the council's services in relation to specific groups of young people and previous areas of marked underachievement. However, there is still some low attainment which remains to be addressed. Attainment of Black and minority ethnic groups is improving and is in line with that of other young people in the local area at Key Stage 4. Most other vulnerable children and young people, such as those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make at least satisfactory progress. The performance of young people in care has improved at Key Stage 4, but there is a mixed picture over time for this group.

Children get a good start to their education. An above average proportion of early years settings are judged to be good in Ofsted inspections. All schools inspected provided at least satisfactory education. However, inspection judgements indicate that attainment is mostly satisfactory rather than good or better. The authority has reduced the number of schools falling below key national targets and is supporting those which are slow to improve by federating them with more successful schools. An Academy opened in Swindon in September 2007 to improve the educational provision and outcomes of some of the lowest performing schools in the borough. This initiative is beginning to have a positive impact on outcomes, but attainment in some of these schools remains below the national average. Results of the Tellus2 survey show that, on the whole, children enjoy school and this is supported by the findings of school inspections. There are no schools in special measures and only one school has a notice to improve. This reflects well on the quality of intensive support provided by the local authority when schools are placed in a category of concern.

Children and young people's attitudes and behaviour in schools are mostly good. Fewer children and young people are excluded from school as a result of better targeting of preventative work and a more rigorous implementation of the authority's behaviour strategy. Permanent exclusions from school have declined over recent years and alternative provision for those not attending school is improving. Children and young people who are excluded are reintegrated into mainstream provision in a timely way.

School attendance is above national averages. The authority monitors effectively the absence strategies used by schools. One of the consequences of this is that the attendance of looked after children is good.

There is an expanding range of facilities and study support through children's centres as well as a growing number of cultural and youth arts programmes. Take-up for these activities is positive. Most parents are clear about the range of alternative provision and the range of facilities available, particularly for younger children. The authority has been faced with difficult choices in managing the reduction of surplus places. It has approached this issue in a strategic way by closing some schools and opening others, reflecting the continued challenges posed by falling demand for places in some areas, balanced by increases in others caused by new housing developments.

Areas for development

- Address remaining underachievement and improve attainment at Key Stages 3 and 4 in particular.
- Continue to improve the educational attainment of children in care.

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 aspect is good. No recommendations emerged from the joint area review.

The involvement of children and young people in making decisions about the services provided by the council has improved and, as a consequence, more activities and programmes are shaped to better meet their needs and wishes. However, in the Tellus2 survey, it is clear that not many young people had the opportunity to give their views about the local area and its activities. Information and advice provided by the council for young people is good. There are more children's centres across the borough. Vulnerable young people in particular have been supported well by the early intervention team. The work of the Youth Service is good and its Positive Futures Programme has achieved national recognition for its impact on reducing anti-social behaviour. Developing links with the Youth Offending Service have had a positive effect on reducing youth offending rates. The number of anti-social

behaviour orders is low. The service involves parents of vulnerable young people at an early stage when incidents occur. Children looked after by the council are supported well through discrete services and by schools. The attendance of looked after children at school is excellent. More accredited courses, such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme, are available in schools enabling young people to develop their self-confidence and to be involved more in community activities. Other programmes, such as Focus and Here By Right, are working well and developing clear regional standards for increasing the participation of young people in programmes and events. Schools are supporting young people well to develop their social skills and emotional maturity as well as other important life skills.

Area for development

- Continue to seek ways of ascertaining the views of young people about their local area, and the range and value of its facilities.

Achieving economic well-being

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate. Three recommendations emerged from the joint area review.

For action in the next six months

- The review of the 16-plus service is completed and an action plan to improve consistency and range of services is implemented.
- The review of 16-plus services addresses the specific support needs of children with disabilities leaving care.

For action in the longer term

- In order to increase the support and availability of work-based learning for young people, the council and Local Learning and Skills Council (LLSC) should develop clear arrangements that include large and medium-sized employers in providing work-based learning opportunities. This should also be supported by plans to increase the proportion of young people achieving Level 2, the equivalent to five GCSEs at grade C or above, by the age of 19.

A review of the 16-plus team has been completed and an action plan has been developed, but it is too soon to judge the impact of recent developments. A review of the transition protocol for disabled young people leaving care is underway with no measurable outcomes to date on whether the number of relevant young people accessing employment and training is increasing. Actions to increase the support and availability of work-based learning for young people, and to increase the proportion of young people achieving Level 2 by the age of 19, are being planned through the

Employer Partnership strategy and the 14–19 strategy implementation plan. It is too early for these to have generated positive outcomes and the attainment of those achieving Level 2 at age 19 remains below the national average. The authority is working hard to improve the quality of post-16 programmes and training. Parenting evenings across the borough are in place and an on-line prospectus has been developed to support improved communication about appropriate courses for families and young people. The Adult and Family Learning Service has expanded its provision in neighbourhood renewal areas and is focusing more on securing better transition for people from training and learning to employment. The proportion of care leavers judged by the council to be in suitable accommodation has increased considerably in the last year and is above the national average. The published 14–19 strategy plan is realistically challenging and there has been good development of future diploma provision. The local authority has regular meetings with the LLSC and Connexions is being relocated to Swindon to improve the provision of advice, guidance and support for young people. There is a clear strategy to address the continuing high numbers of young people who do not enter employment, education or training. There has been an increased focus in schools for mentors to support vulnerable young people and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to make the transition to further education or suitable employment.

Areas for development

- Ensure that 14–19 programmes and training are of good quality and meet the needs of all young people in the area.
- Monitor and evaluate the impact of interventions and developments underway so that further plans and targets for improvement are based on more measurable outcomes.
- Improve attainment at Level 2 at age 19.
- Continue to reduce the numbers of those not in employment, education or training.

Capacity to improve, including the management of services for children and young people

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The council's capacity to improve its services for children and young people and its management of these services are good. A comprehensive action plan was drawn up following the joint area review, which was also linked to the priorities in the Local Area Agreement. The plan has been carefully monitored and all but one of the internal timescales have been met. Two recommendations emerged from the joint area review with regard to service management and capacity to improve.

For action over the next six months

- In order to ensure that the council and its partners understand and provide effective corporate parenting and guidance, they should develop a written strategy. This should describe the distinct role and responsibility of councillors in overseeing arrangements and promoting good outcomes for young people. The strategy should be supported with training and defining the information that councillors need to receive.

For action in the longer term

- In order to ensure that the council's ambition for improvement and delivery of services to children is achieved, plans need to be refined to:
 - enable managers to further develop their skills and capacity to implement change effectively; provide support and enhance the impact of services and staff interventions; and ensure clarity and consistency about what needs improving and when
 - identify the resources required and their allocation.

Looked after children have had the opportunity to contribute to the draft corporate parenting strategy and councillors have received training on their responsibilities as corporate parents. One outcome of this is an apprenticeship scheme for care leavers, in the light of the council being one of the biggest employers in the area. The council set itself an 18-month target to address the recommendation on the improvement and delivery of services and most actions have now been completed. There has been significant investment in management training, using internal and external resources, and performance management is being used effectively to drive improvements. Children's services achieved Investors in People status. Staff retention rates have improved significantly and vacancy rates have correspondingly reduced, although they are still higher than for most councils. The proportion of unfilled teacher posts has reduced by almost half.

The council is clear and realistic about its priorities and what is still to be achieved with adjustments made as new information becomes available. Staff from Kent County Council have been providing support to Swindon for some time. This formal support is coming to an end as there is confidence that Swindon is now in a position to drive its own improvement. The Group Director of Children's Services provides strong leadership, and partnership working with other agencies is sound. Young people have plenty of opportunities to get involved in service planning. Leadership and management of school improvement services are good. The early implementation of the Common Assessment Framework has been well received and multi-agency services are being developed to support early intervention and prevention. The children's rights service is currently out to tender and is expected to be in place in November 2007. Interim arrangements for this are in place.

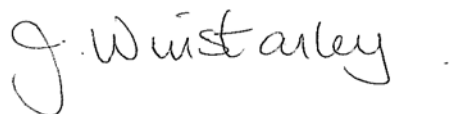
Gross expenditure on looked after children per head is below the national average, although it is increasing at a faster rate. The cost of services per looked after child in foster care or in a children's home is at a good level relative to most other councils. Some budgets have been devolved to frontline staff and their increased ownership of the budget has achieved some savings. The Audit Commission has assessed the council as improving well and providing adequate value for money. A significant investment has been made to improve the youth service which had been of poor quality.

No specific areas for development have been identified beyond the recommendations of the joint area review.

Overall, the council has demonstrated good progress in meeting the joint area review recommendations. It has shown good capacity to maintain and improve further its services for 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