

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 December 2008

Ms Anna Wright
Director of Education and Children's Services
Reading Borough Council
Education and Children's Services
PO Box 2623
Reading
Berkshire
RG1 7WA

Dear Ms Wright

Annual performance assessment of services for children and young people in Reading 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	2
Being healthy	2
Staying safe	1
Enjoying and achieving	2
Making a positive contribution	3
Achieving economic well-being	2
Capacity to improve, including the management of services for children and young people	2

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

Overall effectiveness of children’s services

Grade 2

Reading Borough Council makes an adequate contribution to improving outcomes for children and young people. It delivers services that are mostly above minimum requirements and has made reasonable progress in responding to many of the recommendations made in the APA 2007. During the last year many improvements have been made, especially in raising children and young people’s attainment and reducing the number of first time entrants to the juvenile justice system. However, there are significant weaknesses in child protection arrangements. The council has taken stringent action recently to tackle these serious shortcomings and, in this and other areas, has shown that it has the capacity to bring about further improvement. Multi-agency preventative work is adequate. Good progress has been made in increasing the number of young people participating in youth work and reducing the number of young mothers who smoke.

In some areas, the pace of change has been limited, and inconsistencies or gaps in provision and outcomes have not been tackled quickly enough. There has been additional investment in tier 2 child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) for 0- to 16-year-olds but services for 16- and 17-year-olds are not sufficiently well developed. The figures for teenage conceptions are the second highest in the South East and still well above the national average. The proportion of looked after children living in family placements is high and the children are well cared for, although the high turnover of social workers creates a lack of continuity in their lives. There is still too much variation in provision and outcomes between schools and for different groups of pupils or students. A good diploma programme extends opportunities for young people over 16 but the percentage of 16- to 18-year-olds not in education, employment or training is too high.

Being healthy

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 for this outcome area is consistent with the evidence.

<p>Major strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The percentage of dental and health care checks undertaken for looked after children is higher than nationally or across similar councils. ▪ Young parents receive a good service and are supported to keep their children healthy.
<p>Important weaknesses and areas for development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Services aimed at reducing teenage conception are not sufficiently well coordinated and the provision of sex and relationship education is not always easily accessible or of a high quality. ▪ Comprehensive CAMHS are not available for children aged 16 to 17.

Staying safe

Grade 1

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

<p>Major strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Agencies work well to provide a range of preventative services for children and their families. ▪ A relatively high percentage of adoptions were completed within 12 months of a decision to adopt compared to similar councils.
<p>Important weaknesses and areas for development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The percentage of case conferences and reviews of looked after children that are completed on time has been significantly lower than in similar councils and nationally. ▪ The percentage of initial and core assessments completed on time is significantly lower than the averages nationally and for similar councils. ▪ The turnover of staff in the through care team is detracting the quality of care offered to looked after children.

Enjoying and achieving

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 for this outcome area is consistent with the evidence.

<p>Major strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Standards in mathematics at Key Stage 3 are above the national average and are improving much faster than in similar councils. ▪ Attendance has improved. It is in line with the national average in primary schools and above it in secondary schools. ▪ Permanent and fixed-term exclusions have been reduced in both primary and secondary schools. The percentage of permanent exclusions from secondary schools is lower than that found nationally.
<p>Important weaknesses and areas for development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Standards at Key Stage 1 are well below the averages nationally and for similar councils. Improvement is much slower than elsewhere in the country. ▪ The number of hours per week of alternative tuition for excluded children and young people has been below the national average.

- The percentage of new statements of special educational needs prepared within 18 weeks has been too low.

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

- The contribution by children and young people to strategic planning has had an impact on the design of services.
- Access to youth services is much improved and is now better than in similar councils.
- The number of first time offenders in the area has reduced more quickly than in other areas in England and the percentage of looked after children who offend is also low.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- The proportion of looked after children contributing to their reviews fell by 10 percentage points in the year ending March 2008 and at 79% was below the national average.

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 is accurate but insufficient weight has been given to some important weaknesses such as the limited attention given to the many young people over the age of 16 with low basic literacy and numeracy skills. The council met its targets for reducing the number of young people not in education, employment or training but more remains to be done here.

Major strengths

- Young people's performance in A level or equivalent examinations has risen and is above that of similar councils and nationally.
- The new diploma programme has been planned and developed well.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- The percentage of young people with Level 2 qualifications by age 19 has increased but is still below that in similar councils and nationally.
- The percentage of 16- to 18-year-olds not in education, employment or training is above the average for similar councils and nationally.

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

Grade 2

The council's capacity to improve its services for children and young people is adequate, as is its management of these services. Insufficient staffing limits the rate of improvement in places. Good partnership working, however, is maximising resources at both strategic and operational levels and is having a positive impact on most outcomes. Over the last year, insufficient attention has been given to improving performance in some key areas, for instance in child protection and reducing teenage conception. However, senior officers and members of the council have now put into place a well-resourced package of measures designed to improve performance in both areas.

Ambitions for children and young people are adequate and a clear long-term vision for the future has been agreed by partners. The Children's Trust is providing effective leadership. Prioritisation is satisfactory and based on an extensive analysis of need. Targets for improvement are suitably challenging. However, planning and evaluation documents vary in quality, resulting in some over-estimation of success.

Work on remodelling the services for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities has been completed. The Children's Trust has successfully diverted resources away from some high cost services to enable the Children's Action Teams to deliver coordinated services quickly to support children, young people and their families.

Major strengths

- The council has a good strategic vision for the future. Its aims are clearly articulated and shared, and are based on robust analysis of need.
- Partnership working through the Children's Trust is adding capacity at strategic and operational levels.
- Work on school improvement has been effective in raising standards, particularly at Key Stage 2 and in secondary schools.

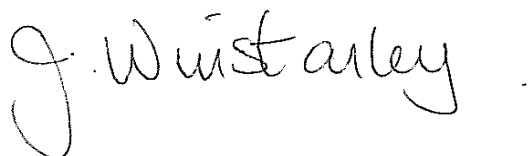
Important weaknesses and areas for development

- Weak performance management in relation to aspects of safeguarding and to high teenage conception rates has resulted in a delayed response to the problems.
- Planning documents vary in quality. Too many actions are insufficiently related to outcomes and not evaluated rigorously.
- Difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff have impeded progress in some areas.

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 large initial 'J'.

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager, Local Services Inspection