

26 November 2007

Ms Bronwen Lacey
Director of Children's Services
Plymouth City Council
Windsor House
Tavistock Road
Plymouth
PL6 5UF

Dear Ms Lacey

2007 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN PLYMOUTH CITY 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 (JAR) and the evidence and briefings provided by Ofsted, other inspectorates and relevant bodies. The letter comments on progress since the recent JAR. 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

Plymouth has made good progress in meeting the recommendations made in the JAR, including those set for the longer term. The council, with its partners, delivers services that are consistently above the minimum requirements. The council is generally accurate in evaluating the quality of its services. It has made many prompt improvements in being healthy and is tackling the one remaining JAR issue. Outcomes in staying safe remain adequate and improvements in core child protection processes, that were evident at the time of the JAR, are now fully embedded. Safeguarding processes are a clear priority for all agencies, with strong partnership collaboration. The contribution the council makes to children's and young people's enjoyment and achievement in their education remains good, while their positive contribution and economic well-being have improved from adequate to good. There is increased, and innovative, consultation with children and young people. The youth service is better organised. The 14–19 curriculum developments are very positive and give young people a wide variety of options for their future. This reflects the council's determination and good capacity to improve.

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 aspect is good. Four recommendations emerged from the JAR.

For immediate action

- Increase the opportunities for children with learning disabilities and/or disabilities, who do not attend special schools, to access speech and language, physiotherapy and occupational therapy services.

For action in the next six months

- Ensure consistent access to a designated doctor for looked after children.
- Ensure robust implementation of the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) strategy in order to ensure integration of CAMHS services, and to increase accessibility to services.

For action over the longer term

- Increase the number of specialist paediatric nurses in the Accident and Emergency Department at Derriford Hospital, in order to match target provision.

The rapid and positive progress that was being made at the time of the JAR has been well built on with strong action on all the JAR recommendations. Good progress has been made in tackling health issues and children and young people's physical and mental health needs are now well integrated in the planning and delivery of services within Plymouth Primary Care Trust (PCT) and the Hospital Trust.

Measures to improve speech and language therapy services have had a good impact, reducing the waiting list for further treatment from 1053 children and young people to 10. Extra staff have been employed to tackle the waiting list backlog for initial assessment and two posts have been created to work with early years providers to educate parents and reduce inappropriate referrals.

Consistent access to medical assessment for children coming into care and oversight by a doctor, of looked after children, has been addressed. A designated doctor for child protection has not yet been appointed; however, consistent access is assured by cover arrangements so that the recruitment difficulty has not adversely affected these children and young people.

Good progress is being made on CAMHS provision, with Plymouth meeting all required indicators for a comprehensive service. A community CAMHS manager, and six primary mental health workers, have now taken up post, providing consultation to professionals in universal and targeted services. There is now a single point of access

for CAMHS. A multi-agency network for Mental Health and Psychological Well-being has been established. A local inpatient service opened early in 2007 and no young person is admitted to an adult bed. Comprehensive plans, with clear targets and monitoring processes, are in place.

Action has been taken to address the low numbers of specialist paediatric nurses in Derriford Hospital A&E Department. Seven-day-per-week cover by nurses with experience in the care of children is being instituted as far as possible and a training framework for experienced nursing staff working with children is being developed in order to extend the number of nurses.

The Public Health Development Unit has published a Child Health Atlas since the JAR took place. With its detailed data, and analysis of the 65 indicators, it is a valuable resource for organisations involved in the planning and delivery of services to children and young people.

Health inequalities exist in Plymouth, with the west side of the city, an area of higher deprivation, making high use of hospital A&E facilities. Health agencies are analysing a range of indicators, such as address, GP practice, etc to enhance the work already taking place to encourage families in those areas to make use of more appropriate healthcare services.

Preventative services and work to encourage healthy lifestyles are good, with a wide range of services and projects tackling healthy eating, reducing obesity, substance and alcohol misuse and sexual health. Plymouth's achievement of the National Healthy Schools Standards is above local and the national averages. Plymouth, with 89% achievement, has the highest performance in the South West for achievement of annual health and dental checks for children and young people who are looked after.

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. Two recommendations emerged from the JAR.

For action in the next six months

- Implement multi-agency quality assurance processes in order to measure and ensure consistency of application of thresholds for Children Concern Model.

For action over the longer term

- The council and its partners should conduct a full review of multi-agency support provided for all children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, in consultation with children and young

people, and their parents and carers. Such a review should include consideration of the range and availability of respite and extended care, the range and accessibility of play and recreational facilities, and the implementation of multi-agency review processes.

Adequate progress has been made to embed the improvements in safeguarding children that were evident at the time of the JAR. Robust quality assurance processes are now used and management information is comprehensive and utilised by managers at all levels. The council, and its partners, collaborate well. Thresholds and consistency of processes for the Child Concern Model are monitored closely. There are regular audits, as part of the Common Assessment Framework implementation which is on target. Feedback from other agencies is positive and the authority plans to gather individual feedback from children and families.

A full review of multi-agency services to children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is being undertaken, with clear commitment from all agencies. This includes consideration of the range and accessibility of play and recreational facilities. Progress has been made. The council, and the PCT, now use shared eligibility criteria for access to services. A review of respite and extended provision is complete and a re-provision programme to provide greater choice to children and their parents/carers is under development for April 2008. An Integrated Disability Services Manager has been appointed. Consultation events to receive parents' views have been held and attention is being paid to gathering the views of children and young people in a user-friendly way. A formal, multi-agency professional and parents project board has been established.

Some performance indicators, such as the rates of referrals and numbers of children placed on the child protection register, are at a high level. This is due to the work that has been required over the past two years to ensure that social care services meet the needs of vulnerable children and young people. The authority has tackled chronic neglect cases with a robust application of child protection thresholds and the increase in registrations is therefore a positive sign. All children on the register, and those who are looked after, are allocated to a qualified social worker. One child protection conference was outside timescales last year, in contrast to the previous two years' 100% achievement. However, the authority is committed to full compliance in future.

Performance management processes have focused on the quality of social care intervention, resulting in improved consistency of practice. However, although quality has improved over the past year, completion of initial and core assessments, within timescales remain lower than in similar authorities or the national average.

The Local Safeguarding Children Board works well, with commitment from senior officers in all agencies, and good attendance. The necessary initial focus on core child protection processes has now started to widen to larger safeguarding matters. Positive feedback has been received about multi-agency child protection training and good working relationships exist both at strategic and operational levels.

The input from the strategic partner has now reduced and will be completed by April 2008. Appointments to managerial posts have been made, with only one team manager vacancy remaining. Difficulties in the recruitment of social worker posts remain, but the strategic partner has helped the authority to develop its workforce and there are good links with the local university that assist the recruitment of high quality staff. The work of agency social workers is well monitored.

The majority of young people responding to the Tellus2 survey stated they feel safe, although responses indicate concern about bullying.

Provision of advice and support on wider safeguarding issues are good. There has been a clear reduction in deaths and serious injuries of children and young people over the past five years, where Plymouth has already done better than the 2010 government target.

Area(s) for development

- Improve the completion of initial and core assessments within timescale.
- Improve recruitment to established social work posts.

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 aspect is good. No recommendations emerged from the JAR in this area.

Parents continue to be well supported to participate in their children's education. In their early education, children make a strong start, gaining higher scores in key areas of personal development and in language skills than children nationally. The authority's moderation of these scores has been judged robust by the National Assessment Agency. The overall effectiveness of all the primary schools inspected in the past year was judged satisfactory or better. In three, it was judged outstanding and only one remains in an Ofsted category of concern. The authority has robust procedures to challenge and support schools, including those graded as satisfactory. Almost all children and young people responding to the Tellus2 survey reported enjoying their education, however, a small number of them worry about being bullied every day. School inspections show children and young people receive good care, guidance and support at all levels of their education.

The results for 2006 show that pupils in Key Stage 1 reach the national average. These results were higher than in similar schools in comparable local authorities. The results in Key Stage 2 were also above the comparator group and at the national average, except in English. Since then, the local authority, together with the national strategies, has worked hard to successfully raise attainment, especially in English, at all levels. In particular there is an improvement in English results in Key Stage 3. The percentage of young people gaining five or more GCSEs graded A*-C was above the

national average in 2006 and recent results show that more young people now include English in their five subjects. The gap between boys and girls attainment in English has begun to narrow. The generally good progress noted in the JAR continues. The number of pupils achieving at least one GCSE grade A*-G continues to be above the national average. Looked after children do exceptionally well, they substantially exceed the level of qualifications achieved by this group nationally. Those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities continue to do as well as their peers.

The local authority is amalgamating a substantial number of schools. These changes are designed to strengthen children and young people's achievements, provide more information and communications technology in disadvantaged areas and provide exciting environments for learning. The first site is nearing completion. The authority was managed a reduction in the number of surplus school places so that Plymouth has below the national average of surplus secondary school places but above the average in the primary sector. Its multi-campus sites have been well planned to deal flexibly with the upturn in the birth rate as well as the temporary drop in secondary numbers.

Children and young people's behaviour is good, starting from nursery school and continuing through to secondary schools. Children and young people who do not have a statement of special educational need, but who have emotional and behavioural difficulties, are effectively identified by schools and get appropriate support. This is an improvement since the JAR. In secondary schools, personal development and well-being are judged by inspections to be good or outstanding. The number of young people permanently excluded from school is small and they now get their full entitlement to tuition. Authorised absence from school was above the national average in 2006. Strong guidance has been given to schools and absence rates are assiduously monitored. Data for the last two school terms show the rate of authorised absences has begun to decline and is close to the national average.

A notable achievement in all but one primary school is the introduction of teaching a modern foreign language. This initiative is successfully broadening children and young people's cultural awareness.

Area(s) for development

- Ensure all staff in schools are fully alert to the signs of bullying and know how to help children and young people, make sure they are aware of strategies for dealing with cyber-bullying.

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. Four recommendations emerged from the JAR.

For immediate action

- Improve youth service provision in line with the recommendations from the Enhanced Youth Inspection, to better meet the needs of children and young people, including those from vulnerable groups.

For action in the next six months

- Improve the numbers of looked after children and young people, and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, who contribute to their reviews, including young children.
- Ensure the views of children and young people and their families are utilised in the planning and development of services.

For action in the longer term

- Extend the services providing support for young carers, so they are more widely available.

Children and young people's involvement in making decisions about local authority provision has improved substantially. They took part in a big consultation which helped, for example, to inform the authority's substance misuse strategy. Their views on the play strategy and leisure facilities are also being fully taken into account. Responses from children and young people led to a reduction in fares so they can more readily afford to travel to out-of-school activities. Young people are frequently involved in interviewing key staff when school appointments are being made. Innovative work has prepared young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to participate in this. Consultation is now routine and widespread across the services.

Looked after children are fully involved in their reviews. This is a good improvement since the JAR. They also show care for other children in need and have given advice on pamphlets to help young runaways. Too few young people in the authority, according to the school survey, feel confident about their legal rights. The youth offending service inspection was positive on almost all aspects. Prompt action is being taken on dealing with the issues it raised. In 2006 the number of children and young people in care receiving a final warning/reprimand was at an acceptable level when compared with the national averages and data from similar authorities.

Children's centres are helping vulnerable children to access multi-agency services. This includes well targeted parenting classes. An early years intervention worker is improving the involvement, and induction, of children from Black and ethnic minorities into these settings. Services are improving for families with children with learning disabilities so they are given more opportunity to contribute to the school they attend as well as helping to appoint the staff who work directly with them.

The local authority has worked hard to reach more young carers and has worked in partnership with Plymouth Zone to provide targeted services to young carers across the city. The remit for the facility, and staff, is clear and there are thorough ways of measuring its impact. Some exciting events have taken place and these young people are now getting more opportunities to have carefree and enjoyable time. There are still a few young carers reporting a sense of isolation but a sustained effort is being made to reach them. The publicity materials are inviting, friendly and informative. This service, which was commended in the JAR, continues to develop strongly.

The youth service has been completely restructured and a new permanent leader has been appointed. There has been good progress on the very detailed post-JAR action plan and all elements are on schedule to be completed by the end of this year. The school challenge and support team has helped to drive this rapid improvement leading to the total redevelopment of the service and enhanced staff training. This, together with the wider consultation with young people, represents good progress since the JAR.

Outdoor activity schemes are under utilised at present. Some imaginative work is being developed on meeting the needs of those resistant to going to youth clubs and buildings in potential trouble spots. Here, youngsters have learned how to present their ideas to the community and how to negotiate and compromise. Work on involving all young people, including vulnerable groups, is well in hand and is met with enthusiasm and enjoyment by the young people. The head of service is working effectively with the police and communities to reduce the use of anti-social behaviour orders. Almost 70% of young people were reached by the youth service in the last published figures. Young people are getting a lot of positive press coverage as they undertake enterprise and community service and participate in a wide range of initiatives such as school councils and the Healthy Schools project. An appreciable effect from this improved support for young people is the recent reduction in the numbers not in education, employment or training. The authority is working successfully to raise aspirations.

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 aspect is good. Four recommendations emerged from the JAR.

For immediate action

- Establish a suitable post-16 performance management system.

For action in the next six months

- Continue the development of a coherent approach to the development of the 14-19 curriculum.

For action in the longer term

- Improve the post-16 provision available to children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.
- Improve the standard and availability of social housing for young people.

The local authority continues to build well on the earlier preparations for the 14-19 strategy recorded in the recent JAR. It has developed a clear management system for the work and is piloting joint self-evaluation. Three diploma submissions were accepted for 2008: construction and engineering were both approved at Level 1 and society and health at Level 2. This provision is carefully targeted at local employment opportunities. The proportion of young people who are not in education, employment or training at age 16 has decreased and the last annual target was met. This group is being successfully targeted and supported so that at vulnerable times they can change courses or placements and not drop out. There are clear targets to further reduce the not in education, employment or training group.

Improvement is evident in GCSE results with the percentage gaining five A* to C rising steadily from year to year and exceeding the national average and comparative groups in 2006. Level 2 achievement overall by age 19 is generally satisfactory but Level 3 achievement remains a priority for improvement. Looked after children and care leavers, had very good outcomes from their education when these were compared to the national average in 2006. The authority has successfully achieved a high level of co-operation between the secondary sector, further education and employers so young people are encouraged and supported on all educational routes, including those involving two sectors.

Enthusiastic 14–19 leadership, combined with good careers advice through Connexions (including for looked after children), creates a very positive picture. The on-line prospectus provides young people with a very diverse set of possibilities. Plymouth has accepted the invitation to apply for Beacon Authority status for its 14-19 developments.

Opportunities for vocational education are well promoted by cross-city networks. Childcare provision is enabling parents to return to work. This is helping the economic well-being of some of the most disadvantaged children and contributes to the small but worthwhile reduction in overall inequalities. Young people with learning disabilities have been well considered and there are effective procedures to support them when moving to post-16 study, in work placements and adult life. These include opportunities in the local authority's catering workforce. This represents very good improvement since the JAR. Parents concerns about the reduction of dedicated courses at the further education college have lessened as young people are increasingly, and effectively, integrated into other provisions.

Housing developments take the needs of young people into account and the local authority is making steady progress on this issue.

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 is good, and its management of these services is good. One recommendation emerged from the JAR:

For action in the next six months

- The council and its partners should ensure that diversity training is accessible by all staff and that consideration of diversity issues is demonstrated in work with service users.

A rolling programme of diversity training for children's services and health managers has been implemented. One hundred and forty-four managers have attended the training to date and the schedule suggests that all third and fourth tier managers will have received training by January 2008. Files are audited and statutory review processes provide regular management information about ethnic origin. These steps ensure that the authority's practice reflects the diverse cultural needs of children and young people.

Overall, there has been significant improvement in service management. The Director of Children's Services and the Chief Executive demonstrate strong leadership, with cross-party council support. Partnership working and performance management are robust, enthusiastic and well-focused. Children's services continue to be a clear priority for the council, and the importance of this is demonstrated by the Chief Executive chairing the Local Safeguarding Children Board.

Statutory, and voluntary, agencies work well together to analyse needs and to develop key services and individual projects. However, overall targets, such as those for the review of the Children and Young People's Plan, are not sufficiently SMART (specific, measurable, agreed upon, realistic and time-based) and, as a result, do not allow the progress being made to be fully evaluated.

Children's services are achieving savings within a corporate commitment to ensure that children and young people are safe and that services are not compromised. Partners work well together to ensure that commissioned services are appropriately funded and of good quality.

Human resources ensure recruitment and appointments are timely and good attention is paid to safe staffing. Delays in moving to Single Status have hindered the recruitment of social workers in particular, as Plymouth pay grades are below neighbouring authorities. However, good progress is being made in workforce development.

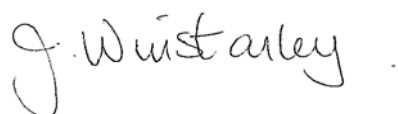
Area(s) for development

- Ensure that strategic, and operational, planning consistently uses SMART targets.
- Remove the remaining barriers to the recruitment of social workers.

Overall the council has demonstrated good progress in meeting the JAR recommendations and has shown a 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 blue ink that reads "Juliet Winstanley".

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager
Local Services Inspection