

26 November 2007

Ms Janet Donaldson
Interim Executive Director of Services for Children,
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Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council
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Dear Ms Baldwin

2007 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN OLDHAM METROPOLITAN 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 2

The overall effectiveness of Oldham council's children's services is adequate. The council has made good progress in a number of important areas in the last year but weaknesses remain in some aspects of enjoying and achieving and in staying safe. The views of children and young people are routinely sought and incorporated into plans. The council restructured its Children's Services in 2006 and was proud to be runner up in the Local Government Chronicle 'most improved council' awards. The Oldham Children and Young People's Partnership as well as the Local Safeguarding Children's Board have become well established and are beginning to play a more significant role in establishing joint partnership working.

Being Healthy

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect continues to be good. Healthy lifestyles are promoted through strong partnerships. Services are well coordinated and targeted to those most at risk.

Particular attention is given to supporting parents and carers in helping them to improve outcomes for their children.

Good access is provided to a full range of assessment and treatment services for children and young people. Vulnerable children, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, have their health needs met. A single assessment process for children with the most complex needs is highly effective and ensures services are responsive and meet individual needs. The actions taken to promote the mental health of children and young people are effective and the council has made very good progress in developing a comprehensive Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service. At 100%, the number of specialist cases seen within 26 weeks is higher than the average for England. The health needs of looked after children are met effectively and an increasing proportion (70%) of looked after children have a health and dental assessment during the year. Health drop-ins are now provided at all residential homes. Teenage conception rates are reducing; the overall rate has decreased by 26.9% since 1988. This is significantly better than national and similar authorities. Moreover, the council has in place suitable strategies, implementation plans and monitoring arrangements to support further reduction.

Participation in the Healthy Schools Programme is good. Of the 112 schools in the authority only five are not participating. Some 60% of schools have achieved the National Healthy Schools Standard; and the council has exceeded its target. Healthy eating and ensuring regular access to sport and exercise are promoted.

The number of children with missing, filled or decaying teeth is higher than nationally. The council has identified this as an area for action and robust plans are in place to increase access to dental services in particular through ensuring accessible local services.

Area for development

- Reduce the high levels of dental decay.

Staying Safe

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution that the council's services for children and young people make to improving outcomes in this area is adequate. Despite some improvements to services the percentage of repeat referrals made to the council is above the national average as is the percentage of children and young people subject to a child protection plan. These high figures indicate some uncertainty over the security of processes for children and young people requiring safeguarding.

Multi-agency locality training has been delivered on the common assessment framework and many schools are confident in how to complete and use the assessment framework. This framework is being used well to support children with challenging behaviour to remain within the area for their education and to target resources more effectively towards individual need. All children and young people are

being supported to fully engage in their own assessment and a 'CAF Card' has been developed to support them through this process.

The Local Safeguarding Children Board has been instrumental in forging improved partnership working. It has also overseen a review of data management processes. There have, however, been some important dips in performance. For example, the percentage of referrals made that were repeat referrals during the last year rose by 3.9% to 36.2%. This figure is much higher than the national average. The rate of re-registrations also rose by 2.4% to 20.5% a figure also well above the national average. Some 68% of initial assessments were completed within seven working days. This compares unfavourably with the national average of 79%. The percentage of core assessments completed within 35 working days was 64% a figure much lower than the national average. An area of strength is that 75% of 547 enquiries which led to initial child protection conferences were held within 15 days. This is much better than found nationally or in similar authorities. The council has carried out an evaluation of the reasons for the apparent decline in performance and identified that the key issues were around data management and the counting of contacts as first referrals.

Adoption of looked after children has increased by 2.5% to just below similar authorities and all looked after children are allocated a social worker. A high number of looked after children (20.4%) are placed with family and friends. This percentage is higher than that of similar authorities (17.5%) and above the national average (12.7%).

Young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are supported well through transition; over 90% had a transition plan in 2006-07. This is higher than similar authorities (70%) and the national average (63%).

Strong action has been taken to ensure the safety of young people at risk of sexual exploitation. A multi-agency team, including the police, Primary Care Trust, the local college and youth services has been established and effectively works with these young people to raise aspirations and self-esteem. A dedicated specialist residential care home for girls most at risk has been established and is proving very successful in supporting these young people to return to mainstream education.

The council seeks the views of children and young people and through surveys, school councils and local events has identified a number of areas for further development. For example, a concern expressed by young people about bullying has prompted the council to support the youth council in delivering an authority wide event focussing on bullying. In addition children and young people have been involved in discussions with the council, youth services and other key partners on how to work with those children who bully. As a result of this more children are being supported to remain within main-stream education.

Areas for development

- Reduce the number of re-registrations and re-referrals.
- Improve the timescales for completing initial and core assessments.

Enjoying and Achieving

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate. The council serves an area with higher than average levels of deprivation. From a low starting point, the council has made significant strides in addressing underperformance in its schools and is closing the gap against similar authorities and national averages. In some, but not all, aspects it is beginning to exceed these. It has been successful in ensuring that no schools achieved below the national floor targets in 2006 and overall pupils' achievement and progress at Key Stage 2 and 4 are now broadly in line with similar authorities and nationally. This represents good progress in terms of these measures but the council is well aware that weaknesses still remain, particularly in reading at Key Stage 1 and generally at Key Stage 3 where standards are not as good as those found in similar areas.

At Key Stage 2 standards in English, mathematics and science have continued to improve and are now comparable with those in similar authorities and nationally. By the time they leave school at age 11 pupils have made similar progress to that found nationally.

At Key Stage 3 standards in mathematics and science have improved steadily and are broadly in line with those in similar authorities. One example is the proportion achieving Level 5 or better in mathematics which improved by 9% between 2002 and 2006. In English the average point score is in line with similar authorities but the proportion achieving Level 5 or better is below average and remains a weakness.

Standards at Key Stage 4 have risen. The proportion of pupils achieving five GCSE passes at grades A* to C has increased by 11.5% since 2002 and is now in line with national averages. The proportion of pupils achieving five GCSE passes at grades A* to C including English and mathematics in 2006 were comparable to those found in similar authorities. Pupils make better than average progress during Years 10 and 11, but their progress from Year 7 to the end of Year 11 is below the national average. There has been an improvement in the proportion of looked after children achieving at least one GCSE pass and this is now slightly above that found in similar authorities. The proportion who achieve five grades A* to C in GCSE is significantly higher than that found in similar authorities and nationally. Inspection evidence shows that the proportion of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities who make good or better progress is higher than that found in similar authorities.

A particular strength of the council lies in the effectiveness of its school improvement strategy. Schools speak positively of the challenge they receive to improve their performance. The impact of this is seen in the fact that no schools are subject to

special measures following Ofsted inspection and the one primary school which has a notice to improve is making good progress in eradicating its weaknesses. Targeted interventions have resulted in significant improvements in some of its weaker schools where achievement and standards have been identified by the authority as a cause for concern.

Attendance in primary and secondary schools is at similar levels to those found nationally and in similar authorities. Fixed term exclusions are in line with similar authorities and permanent exclusions are at higher levels than in similar authorities or nationally. The local authority has reduced unauthorised absence to a level below that found in similar authorities and has been particularly successful in ensuring that all permanently excluded pupils receive at least 20 hours education per week. The attendance of looked after pupils is just below the average for the authority as a whole.

In partnership with National Children's Homes council officers have been working on a project to identify the needs of 65 young carers and the barriers they experience in accessing local services. Specific support has been provided, for example with homework or in providing respite from their caring responsibilities. There are over 300 known young carers in Oldham and the council recognises that it needs to do more to track the attendance and achievement of each one.

The overall effectiveness and achievement of pupils in nearly three quarters of primary schools inspected during the year was found to be good. Of the six secondary schools inspected, overall effectiveness and pupils' achievements were judged to be good in two and satisfactory in the other four. All six secondary schools were judged to have good leadership and management and capacity for improvement.

The quality of early years provision was found during inspection to be predominantly satisfactory and the proportion which is good or better is lower than average.

Areas for development

- Improve achievement and standards in Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 3.
- Improve the overall effectiveness of secondary schools.

Making a positive contribution

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect continues to be good. Children and young people have very good opportunities to ensure their voice is heard, through school councils, the youth council, locality events and surveys. Their voice is responded to well, for example through the weekly article in the local paper raising awareness of issues relating to staying safe and in the development of a youth council website. Young people speak positively about their opportunity to contribute and feel that their voice is heard.

Members of the youth councils are given good support through the youth services and are fully represented at council meetings.

The Youth Offending Service (YOS) was reorganised last year and this appears to have been effective. Over the past year, there has been a significant reduction in the number of first time entrants to the youth justice system. Re-offending rates have reduced by 17% to 44.5%, which is lower than average. There has been a decrease in the percentage of final warnings; reprimands and convictions of looked after children which is 1% below the levels achieved by similar councils. The number of young people who are reached by the youth services has increased significantly to 26.7%, an 11% increase. This is just above the national target and just below the national average.

The co-location of health, connexions, the Youth Offending Service and other key providers is providing looked after children who offend with particularly good access to a range of services. This is beginning to bring about improvements in their health and ambition with regard to further education, training and employment. For example the number of these young people who participated in their reviews increased by 20%, although this remains 6% below similar authorities. Too few young people who offend are in full time education, training or employment. Only 64% were in education, training or employment in 2006, 25% below the national target of 90%.

Area for development

- Increase participation rates in education, training or employment of young people who offend.

Achieving economic well-being

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect continues to be good and aspects of its work are outstanding.

The council has been particularly effective in bringing about successful collaboration between schools, colleges and training providers. Its borough-wide strategy for 14–19 year olds is well established and recognised as an example of good practice. The online district prospectus is complete and young people in Years 10 and 11 use it to register for the wide range of vocational courses on offer to them across the borough. The council provides additional funding to support this alternative curriculum programme and the number of young people participating has increased to 575 and is at its highest. The council is ready to introduce the three specialist diplomas which it has been given approval for. Young people in Oldham receive good advice in preparing them for moving on from school. The alternative curriculum has led to demonstrably improved engagement of vulnerable young people in education and training. The proportion of this group who enter education, employment or training on leaving school is higher than the authority average. There have also been

improvements in the proportion of work based learners successfully completing NVQ training and this is now better than national.

The quality of provision for 16–18 year olds in the two colleges was judged during inspection to be very good. Students' achievements in sixth form provision are significantly above those found nationally. The proportion of 16–18 year olds achieving level 1 qualifications in further education fell in 2005 and was well below average, whilst in sixth form provision it was above the national average. The council has reached its target for those achieving level 2 at age 19 two years ahead of schedule. The proportion of students achieving level 3 at 18 is in line with the national average in both the further education college and in sixth form provision. However, the proportion achieving level 3 qualifications at age 19 is 5.7% below the national average. The council recognises that improving this figure is a challenge. Improving the proportion of school leavers who achieve five GCSE passes at grades A* to C including English and mathematics, as well as improving the literacy skills of British minority ethnic students are important steps to achieving this. The 2007 results suggest that the council is having success with both of these measures and this gives more confidence about students' potential to achieve success on their level 3 courses. A higher number of young people have applied to go to university this year and this reflects the good guidance and support which they have received.

Participation and progression rates in Oldham are satisfactory overall and good compared with similar authorities. The proportion of teenage mothers who are in full time education, employment or training varies year on year and to some extent depends on the availability of locally funded council projects as well as individual family circumstances. The proportion of care leavers staying on is good. Despite the council's efforts and previous successes in reducing the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training, the figure rose in 2006. This rise was due mainly to a significant decline in the borough's economic situation and a 29% increase in unemployment across the borough. This led to a reduction in the availability of employment and apprenticeships. The council has recognised the transport difficulties affecting young people finding work in other areas and is actively seeking to provide free or subsidised travel to support them. The proportion of school leavers with learning difficulties and/or disabilities who do not stay on has increased and is above average. The council has successfully ensured that the proportion of 16–18 year olds whose activity is unknown remains below its target of 5% and this is much lower than average. Whilst the proportion of 19 year olds whose activity is unknown has fallen since 2005, at 29.6% it remains well above similar authorities or the national average of 23.7%.

There has been an increase in the number of child care places available and the council has exceeded its target in this area of its work. The proportion of children and young people accommodated in bed and breakfast or hostels is below that found in similar authorities.

Areas for development

- Improve the proportion of learners achieving level 3 qualifications at age 19.
- Reduce the proportion of 16–19 year olds not in education, employment or training.

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

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The council has strong political leadership and ambitious plans based on a clear vision for improving its provision for children and young people. It is a forward thinking authority which is following a clear direction. The council has successfully addressed the issues for improvement raised in the APA in 2006 but there has been some slippage in child protection performance this year. Its track record is, however, generally good in securing improvements. It has good capacity to improve further.

There is genuine concern for bringing about community cohesion and addressing the town's historical difficulties. The planned transformation of secondary schools has this aim at the heart of its proposals.

Effective action has been taken to bring stability to the staffing structure within the youth offending service and so improve provision for young offenders. It has also increased the number of social workers and care managers it has employed. These improvements need to be sustained.

The strategy for developing children's centres lost momentum. It is being revitalised with a clearer direction for its implementation emerging.

The council's special educational needs (SEN) strategy and funding arrangements are unclear to schools and senior officers recognise that the current provision is in need of review. Some steps have been taken to improve funding arrangements for SEN as part of the wider funding review which is being conducted. The council intends to involve schools in developing a new borough wide strategy for its SEN provision.

A culture of accountability is becoming firmly embedded and this enables the council to more closely monitor the impact of its work. Plans are well underway for integrated commissioning of services, particularly to meet the needs of the most vulnerable children and their families.

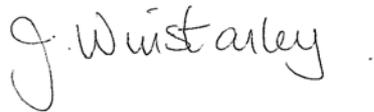
Areas for development

- Ensure data management processes for child protection are secure.
- Revise the SEN strategy and funding arrangements to build schools' capacity to improve provision.

- Consolidate improvements made to the youth offending service and sustain its capacity to improve further.
- Improve the strategy for developing children's centres.

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". The signature is written in a cursive style with a period at the end.

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager
Local Services Inspection