

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



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Mrs V Gwynn
Director of Children's Services
Milton Keynes Council
Civic Offices
1 Saxon Gate East
Milton Keynes
MK9 3HQ

Dear Mrs Gwynn

2007 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN MILTON KEYNES 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 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 children's services is adequate. The council has ensured that the area is economically buoyant. Partnerships with business and the voluntary sector are consistently very strong and this has a positive impact on the creation of opportunities for children and young people. The authority is good at enabling children and young people to make a positive contribution and although educational standards are below national averages, progress has been made in improving outcomes. In the last year the local authority has moved forward in setting an agenda for change, in developing capacity and creating robust strategic plans to enable delivery. Small improvements are already evident and the effect of much of the recent work has just begun to impact on outcomes.

Being healthy

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. There is satisfactory understanding of the health needs of children and young people in Milton Keynes with appropriate priorities for work. Engagement with the Primary Care Trust (PCT) is good; the PCT is represented on the council's Children's Services management team. The recommendation in the

2006 joint area review (JAR) to review and improve arrangements for partnership working with the Acute Trust has been implemented successfully. The Hospital Trust is now engaged in both the strategy and planning groups.

The early years service contributes well to the comprehensive range of services available to support parents and carers. Increased investment in the Healthy Schools Programme means that over half the schools have now achieved Healthy School Status, exceeding both the local and national targets for the calendar year.

Targeted work continues on tackling the rise in obesity. An innovative approach to the Department of Health obesity survey has resulted in a good response rate and provision is rated highly in the schools' survey. The percentage of children and young people taking part in two hours of sport per week exceeds the national target. This year's target aims to halt the rise in obesity through both universal measures and those targeted at vulnerable groups.

The good strategy for an expanded Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), noted by the JAR, is being implemented with positive results for children young people. Access to the service is easier and waiting times are better than the national average. More children and young people are being treated in the community and work with children and young people receiving service from the youth offending team is well integrated. Processes have been put in place to provide support for children and young people who are looked after from a range of sources including a dedicated service for foster carers. It is too early to measure the impact of this provision.

The strategy for reducing teenage conceptions has been reviewed following a rise in numbers of pregnancies to above the national average. The council is proactive in putting new measures in place. Challenging local area agreement targets have been set. The engagement with schools has been increased and outreach support has been provided to boys as well as girls.

National and local targets for oral health, breast-feeding and not smoking have been met. The authority has analysed infant mortality and recognises that there is work still to be done, and a number of steps have been taken to achieve improvements focused primarily on young children. The percentage of babies with low birth weight has steadily reduced and is now at the national average and all General Practitioner practices provide health surveillance for children and young children. The infant mortality rate is now declining.

A smaller proportion of young people than nationally are in treatment for substance misuse but those that are, are treated by services geared towards young people. The percentage of looked after children and young people that have had dental checks is above the national average. However, one quarter of looked after children and young people have not had health assessments and Milton Keynes has not developed a range of age-appropriate opportunities for children and young people to seek advice and promote their physical well-being.

Areas for development

- Ensure a range of age-appropriate measures to promote the good physical health of looked after children and young people.
- Improve the number of looked after children and young people who have health assessments.

Staying safe

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 has been proactive in introducing a number of initiatives to prevent harassment and bullying, such as safer neighbourhoods and 'right to be safe' conferences. Safety provision in the early years settings is consistently adequate or better and all schools meet current government requirements on safeguarding children and young people. All schools now have a designated and trained child protection officer. Through Tellus2 and other surveys children and young people report that they feel safe and that bullying is not a significant issue in schools.

Milton Keynes Family Support Services are effective. A recent strengthening of support services has led to a significant reduction in the numbers on the Child Protection Register or subject to child protection procedures. These are low compared to national comparators. Improved assessment procedures have reduced the re-referral rate which is well below comparable authorities. All children who are on the Child Protection Register are allocated qualified social workers. Almost all children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities aged 14 and over have a transition plan to support their move from Children's Services to Adult Services.

The recent evaluation of the common assessment framework pilot indicates that frontline workers understand preventative thresholds and are effective in ensuring timely interventions. Responses to referrals and initial assessments are good and showing an improving trend. The number of core assessments undertaken is small but too few are completed within national target times.

The number of looked after children and young people with three or more placements during the year has improved consistently since 2004 but does not meet the national target. The proportion of kinship placements is low. Although adoption rates are good, general longer term stability has deteriorated further to below the national target. As the authority recognises, there is often a mismatch between need, placement type and location. Per capita expenditure on placements has increased this year and is considerably higher than the national average. The council recognises the need to increase and sustain its stock of local and specialist foster carers and reduce the use of external and residential placements and has begun

working to achieve this. All looked after children and young people are allocated social workers but reviews of those looked after do not meet national targets for timely completion. The council acknowledges that outcomes for looked after children and young people are weaker than they should be and has recently increased specialist management capacity appropriately to address this.

The Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB) was established on time and has developed a range of appropriate policies. However, it has been slow to respond fully to the recommendation in last year's letter 'to improve practice, to check the quality, consistency and effectiveness of the safeguarding and family support arrangements.' The recent appointment of an independent chair has provided leadership and processes are in place to implement this recommendation.

Areas for development

- Increase the range of placement choices and the long term stability of looked after children and young people.
- Improve the level of core assessments completion and timeliness.
- The LSCB should address the recommendation from last years' APA more rapidly.

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 has taken action to ensure that the educational standards reached by children and young people in Milton Keynes are improved, particularly at Key Stage 2 and at GCSE. At Key Stage 1, standards are in line with national averages in reading, writing and mathematics. At Key Stage 2, as a result of intensive support from the authority and national strategies, the overall percentages of children reaching Level 4 have been steadily rising in English, mathematics and science but remain below the national standards in English and mathematics. Unvalidated 2007 Key Stage 3 results are two percentage points below national performance in English and mathematics and four percentage points below in science. At GCSE level, results have risen with eight of the ten eligible secondary schools showing improvement according to the unvalidated 2007 results. These also showed that the overall percentage of students achieving at least five higher grade passes rose this year from 50% to 52%. However, this is still likely to be below the national average. Contextual value added data indicate that the progress that pupils make from Key Stage 2 is in line with the national average.

Provision for young children is good and is free to all who want it. Children do well in attaining the early learning goals before starting school. Children and young people who are not in school are now receiving appropriate full-time education. However, in

both the special and secondary sector too many children and young people are being excluded from school.

The Tellus2 survey, which was completed only by Year 6 pupils in Milton Keynes, indicates that most children enjoy school and the overwhelming majority say that they do their best there. Attendance at school is above average. Although the respondents to the survey expressed some concerns about behaviour in school, inspections have shown that it is satisfactory or better in all the schools visited.

There are some outstanding and good schools in all sectors. However, there are also some that are not providing an adequate education and where children and young people are not achieving as well as they should. The proportion of schools judged by Ofsted to require special measures or a notice to improve was significantly higher than the national average. The local authority has taken robust action to secure improvement and most of these schools are now making good progress. Schools now collaborate effectively to support the professional development of staff.

Systems are in place to ensure that the progress of individuals and of vulnerable groups is tracked and that resources are targeted where most needed. As a result, all minority ethnic groups except Black African are now making good progress and the authority is targeting this issue well. The proportion of looked after children and young people who are aged 16 and able to sit their GCSEs and attain at least one GCSE grade A*--G has risen significantly, as has the proportion attaining five A*-C grades. However, a high proportion of looked after children and young people missed a total of more than 25 days of education during the year 2006/7.

A high proportion of young offenders are in suitable full time education and they are well supported by the youth offending team. The youth service is well resourced and has organised a good range of activities, arts and sport for young people. Care is taken to ensure that different groups, and particularly vulnerable groups, are enabled to participate with good success.

The APA letter of 2006 states that the council should develop a clearer vision for the future of special schools and their links with mainstream schools. This remains under development but the authority has commissioned a report from an external consultant about this and has agreed key principles.

Areas for development

- Improve the attainment of all students at Key Stages 2, 3 and at GCSE.
- Ensure that all schools offer adequate educational provision and increase the proportion that offer good or better provision.
- Continue to make provision to ensure that looked after children and young people attend school and achieve well.

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 is good. The council has responded effectively to the recommendation from the 2006 JAR that they should, with their partners, develop a strategy for involving children and young people in decisions which impact upon their lives. A Youth Participation Strategy has been agreed and work is underway to recruit and train a youth cabinet. Year 6 children who responded to the Tellus2 survey and other groups confirm that they are positive about being consulted. There is a high rate of take-up in decision making with school councils being well attended. The council has exceeded the target for participation in the Millennium Volunteers project. In early years a higher percentage of provision than normal receives a good judgement over children's social and emotional development.

The youth service has been successful in reducing anti-social behaviour through a well targeted range of strategies. It has engaged a significantly higher than average proportion of young people in a wide range of opportunities and, in many cases, young people have gained qualifications. Parenting courses and an enquiry line have been well used. A large majority of participants on a course run for young people who are not in education, employment or training have been re-engaged.

Through a variety of well planned work with young people at risk of offending, the authority has reduced by one quarter the number of first time entrants into the youth justice system. There is a clear youth justice plan with appropriate priorities. The key performance indicators show that the youth offending team is performing well. Custodial remands have been relatively small in number and there is good compliance with national standards. However, the number of looked after children and young people that have been cautioned or convicted rose in the last year and is now above the national average. The council recognises there is more work to be done in this area.

The youth service has carefully targeted resources towards vulnerable groups, including those with disabilities. It engages with a higher than average proportion of children and young people from Black and minority ethnic groups. All looked after children and young people were involved in the review of their care plans and a significant number chaired their own reviews. Similarly, children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have been consulted on the development of integrated services for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Almost all the children and young people concerned have transition plans and impartial information and advice is available to their parents and carers. Children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities participate in events and competitions with other disability clubs regionally.

Area for development

- Reduce the number and proportion of looked after children and young people who are convicted and/or cautioned.

Achieving economic well-being

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. In keeping with the council's renewed focus on its provision for looked after children and young people, the council's employment support officer has had her brief widened to provide job search training, advice and guidance for looked after children and young people. As a result, the council is expecting to improve further its current good performance of half of care leavers engaged in education, employment or training, which is in line with the national average. All but one of their care leavers is housed in suitable accommodation provided by the council or other partners.

The council and the PCT are at an early stage of establishing an integrated service for children and young people with disabilities and additional complex needs. The Learning Disability Strategy Group has reviewed and determined to trial taster courses with selected groups but has not yet put in place a range of courses. It is evaluating work and other off-site provision and the development of a key worker provision. The council acknowledges there is further work to do in these areas. They have, however, significantly improved the proportion of children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities who are in education, employment or training, which is now approaching the national average.

In response to the JAR of 2006 the authority has begun to develop its post 16 vocational provision effectively. Although fewer young people go on to education after the age of 16 in Milton Keynes than is the case nationally, the proportion of young people engaged in education, employment or training is above average. Partnerships with businesses are good. The range of vocational courses on offer has increased and is adequate. Similarly, the provision of Level 1 and life skills courses is adequate. Adult and Continuing Education has contributed well to this development. Collaboration between most schools and two local colleges is good, and it is developing between schools.

The achievement of young people at the age of 19 is adequate. The rate of increase of young people completing an apprenticeship is improving. The authority has made raising standards at Level 2 a priority and has begun to put in place measures to effect this which will inevitably take time to impact on the results gained by young people. Standards at this level have risen faster than those nationally but they remain below the national average. Unvalidated data suggest that standards at Level 3 have risen significantly this year and are likely now to be in line with, or above, national averages. The local authority has offered training to sixth form teachers in preparing students for university entrance and early indications are that results at

GCE/VCE/AS level have risen, although they are likely to remain below the national average.

Areas for development

- Further improve success and participation rates at Level 2.
- Further raise standards at GCE/VCE/AS level.
- Continue to develop provision for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

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

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The council has adequate capacity to improve its services for children and young people. Milton Keynes maintains a very high growth rate, increasing in size by over 4000 residents annually, which creates specific and unusual challenges. The senior leadership has conducted a comprehensive review of performance and identified appropriate ambitious priorities for improvement. Whilst the council is too generous in terms of some of the grades it would award itself, it does have a clear idea of its strengths and weaknesses. These priorities are widely shared and understood both within and beyond the organisation. Robust systems for performance management have been recently put in place but the impact of these is not yet evident. The pace of change, however, has been too slow in relation to the provision of high quality care for looked after children and young people and the full functioning of the LSCB.

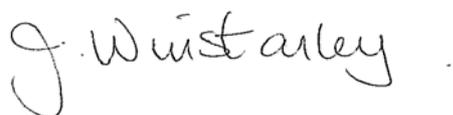
The structure of Children's Services has been reorganised in the past year in order to provide flexibility and integrated provision. There is good strategic planning across the directorate management team but planning at operational level is not yet well synchronised between different service areas, for example between the inclusion team and the team developing the 14-19 curriculum. Key new posts have been and are being created to meet specific key priority areas such as services to children and young people who are looked after by the council, the equalities agenda and inclusion. There are appropriate joint appointments between Learning and Development and the Milton Keynes PCT, and between adult and children social care. Steps are being taken to develop an effective workforce strategy to ensure that there is good collaboration between the council, the PCT and the voluntary sector. The LSCB has recently been fully set up but is not yet delivering as comprehensively as it should. The training and support of the council workforce is now carefully planned. As a result of a pay structure review and internal training, the social care staff is now at full strength. This represents significant progress. In many areas of the council's work it will take time for the impact of these improvements to be evident, but in some, such as the achievement of children and young people, small improvements are already evident.

Areas for development

- Ensure that collaboration between teams becomes effective at an operational level in order to ensure that all the needs of every child are met in a planned manner.
- Ensure that the current momentum is sustained and that the rate of change is increased in those areas where it has been slow.

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