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17 December 2008

Ms Helen Lincoln  
Interim Director of Children, Schools and Families  
London Borough of Merton  
Merton Council  
Civic Centre  
London Road  
Morden  
SM4 5DX

Dear Ms Lincoln

## **Annual performance assessment of services for children and young people in the London Borough of Merton 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.

<b>Assessment judgement area</b>	<b>APA grade</b>
Overall effectiveness of children's services	3
Being healthy	3
Staying safe	3
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	3

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

## Overall effectiveness of children’s services

Grade 3

The London Borough of Merton makes a good contribution to improving outcomes for children and young people. It delivers services which are consistently above minimum requirements for users. The council has continued to build on the positive outcomes from last year’s JAR in being healthy, staying safe and making a positive contribution.

The impact of services on the health of children in the area is good. There is now a good child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) and the council is aware of the need to address health inequalities. Good progress is being made in keeping children safe and in targeted services for those most in need. Services for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are being restructured following consultation since the JAR, however, it is too early to measure the impact of these changes. Children and young people are listened to and their voices heard using well-structured mechanisms for consultation. Re-offending rates have fallen significantly and are much lower than comparable councils.

The judgement for enjoying and achieving is lower than that awarded by the JAR; this is because attainment in secondary schools is below that of comparable councils and did not improve sufficiently in 2007. The council has a very good understanding of the reasons for this and has tackled issues regarding data reliability and performance management robustly. It is too early for the impact of these measures to be fully demonstrated. Progress on raising standards in 14–19 education since the JAR has been satisfactory. There are good strategic long-term plans for the reconfiguration of schools to improve 14–19 provision in the area.

Leadership is good and clearly committed to improving services. Priorities are well defined and performance management is robust. Partnership working is effective and realistic ambitions have been set by the partnership that is reflected in the Local Area Agreement (LAA). The council’s capacity to improve, including its management of services, is therefore good.

## Being healthy

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

- There is a good understanding of health inequalities and the council and its partners actively support healthy lifestyles for children. There has been good progress in implementing the Healthy Schools Programme.
- The proportion of mothers initiating breast-feeding has more than doubled from the baseline and is now high.
- Good progress is being made towards offering comprehensive CAMHS; waiting times are now good and better than the national average.

<b>Important weaknesses and areas for development</b>
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The percentage of looked after children who receive timely dental and health checks has fallen and is now below that of comparable councils.</li> </ul> |
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## Staying safe

**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 in this outcome area underestimates some important weaknesses and overvalues the areas where progress has been made. The table below sets out the evidence for the grade awarded. The council's priorities for further development are in the main appropriate.

<b>Major strengths</b>
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Robust planning processes for looked after children and for young people subject to child protection plans.</li> <li>▪ A higher number of reviews of looked after children and child protection conferences are completed on time compared to similar councils.</li> <li>▪ Initial and core assessments are completed in a timely manner.</li> <li>▪ Effective risk assessments and good use of preventative services have led to a low number of children being looked after.</li> </ul> |
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<b>Important weaknesses and areas for development</b>
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The short term stability of placements for looked after children is poor.</li> <li>▪ The formation of multi-disciplinary teams for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities has been slow and the council does not know whether there is sufficient short break provision for these children.</li> </ul> |
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## Enjoying and achieving

**Grade 2**

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate. This is not in line with the council's self-assessment. The council's analysis of its strengths and areas for development for this outcome area is not consistent with the evidence.

<b>Major strengths</b>
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Provision in the early years ensures that children make a good start to their education.</li> <li>▪ Good progress on delivering the extended schools agenda through multi-agency working and close partnership with the voluntary sector.</li> <li>▪ Looked after children achieve good examination outcomes at 16; their performance is generally better than that of comparable councils.</li> </ul> |
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<p><b>Important weaknesses and areas for development</b></p>
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|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Standards at Key Stage 4 remain below both national levels and comparable councils and this does not prepare some young people adequately for post-16 engagement.</li> <li>▪ There has been a rise in the number of primary schools placed in an Ofsted category of concern and too many remain below floor targets.</li> <li>▪ Fixed term exclusions from secondary schools are rising and are well above comparable councils.</li> </ul> |
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## 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.

<p><b>Major strengths</b></p>
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ There are a wide range of good, well-structured methods for the participation of young people in decision-making that enables them to influence services that affect them.</li> <li>▪ A high percentage of young people who are involved in offending are in full time education, training or employment. Performance has been consistently better than both the national average and comparable councils.</li> <li>▪ Young people's re-offending rate in the area is very low compared to similar councils and the number of looked after children who have received final warnings is zero.</li> </ul> |
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<p><b>Important weaknesses and areas for development</b></p>
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ A significant rise in first time entrants into the criminal justice system.</li> </ul> |
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## 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 and areas for development for this outcome area is not consistent with the evidence.

<p><b>Major strengths</b></p>
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Outcomes and provision for looked after young people are at least as good as comparable councils, and in some respects better; there are good transitional support arrangements for young people leaving care.</li> <li>▪ Some aspects of vocational provision, for example, National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) success rates and the numbers completing apprenticeships, are good.</li> </ul> |
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### **Important weaknesses and areas for development**

- There has been limited progress since the JAR in coordinating the effective delivery of education and training or in raising standards at 14–19.
- The number of 16- to 18-year-olds whose current activity is not known continues to rise and is above the national figure.

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

**Grade 3**

The council's capacity to improve its services for children and young people and its management of these services is good. This level of good overall performance has now been sustained for three years. The council has made satisfactory progress on most of the areas identified by the JAR, but improvements to enjoying and achieving have been more limited.

The council works well with a range of partners on clearly identified priorities. Ambition is linked to the LAA, shared by partners and clearly articulated within robust planning processes. The LAA targets are at the heart of a comprehensive and detailed Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP) and progress towards achieving them has been mainly good. Even though the council spends significantly less than comparable councils on its children's services, it provides good value for money. It achieves this by ensuring that resources are put into preventative services whilst at the same time offering high quality services for those with a significant level of need. The council has enhanced its capacity by successfully bidding for a range of government-funded initiatives.

The council has graded itself more highly in some areas than the evidence indicates, however it does have a good knowledge of the local area and is aware of its strengths and weaknesses. The council's actions since the JAR have resulted in service improvements for minority ethnic communities, for example, the increase in take-up of CAMHS by the Asian community. The council fulfils its corporate parenting role very effectively as evidenced by sustained good outcomes for looked after children in most areas. The council effectively enables children and young people to influence decisions about services that affect them. The school improvement service has been slow to identify underperforming primary schools, but has taken robust action since the JAR to raise the performance of secondary schools. The unvalidated 2008 GCSE results indicate significant improvement as a result of this work.

The recruitment of good quality social workers, whilst improving, remains an area of concern for the council. A strategy has been put in place since the JAR but has had minimal impact on improving recruitment.

<b>Major strengths</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Political leadership is good, and there is a clear understanding of the needs of the area resulting in sustained good performance over three years.</li><li>▪ The council sets realistic but ambitious goals, driven through effective partnerships that are linked to the LAA.</li><li>▪ Good prioritisation is evident, resources are well utilised and as a result the council provides good value for money.</li></ul>
<b>Important weaknesses and areas for development</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Limited progress to delivering more effective 14–19 education since the JAR.</li><li>▪ Recruitment and retention of social care staff.</li></ul>

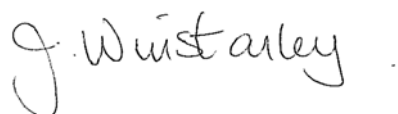





The children's services grade is the performance rating for the purpose of section 138 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. It will also provide the score for the children and young people service block in the comprehensive performance assessment to be published by the Audit Commission.

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".

Juliet Winstanley  
Divisional Manager  
Local Services Inspection