

4 December 2007

Mr Stuart Smith
Executive Director of Children's Services
Liverpool City Council
Municipal Buildings
Dale Street
Liverpool
L2 2DH

Dear Mr Smith

2007 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN LIVERPOOL CITY COUNCIL

This letter summarises the findings of the 2007 annual performance assessment (APA) for your local authority, some aspects of which were conducted at the same time as the joint area review (JAR). The 2006 APA informed the scoping of the JAR, and the initial findings of the 2007 APA were taken into account by the review team at the end of the analysis stage. The outcomes of the JAR were then considered alongside a review of recent data in arriving at the final APA judgements for 2007. As a result, many of the areas for development highlighted in this letter align with the recommendations in the JAR report and should be similarly aligned in any future action plan produced by the council and its partners. The judgements in the letter also draw on your assessment of progress or review of the Children and Young People's Plan and the evidence and briefings provided by Ofsted, other inspectorates and relevant bodies. Information from the Audit Commission's school survey has also been taken into account. We are grateful for the information you provided to support this and for the time given by you and your colleagues to the assessment process.

Overall effectiveness of children's services

Grade 3

Liverpool City Council consistently delivers above minimum requirements and makes a good contribution towards improving outcomes for children and young people. Children's services make a significant contribution to improving the achievement and well-being of children and young people within a city that faces significant social and economic challenges.

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 is good. There is good targeting and a multi-agency approach to health promotion through the city's children's centres which are located in the most deprived areas and accessed frequently by those most in need of services. Similarly good health promotion is provided through the Healthy Schools programme. The number of health assessments for looked after children are high. The range of inclusive and flexible services targeted to need is good, for example the Mates project has included a focus on aspects of health promotion while the Mad, Bad and Misunderstood project has addressed attitudes towards young people with emotional and behavioural difficulties. The latter has helped to reduce rates of school exclusions, and a number of young people employed as Mates have gained accredited awards and subsequent employment, although formal evaluation of the improved health outcomes achieved by these and other projects is not well developed.

Some health indicators such as those for oral health are poorer than nationally and similar authorities. Children's centres, all with dedicated oral health workers, are targeting work to improve oral health and three centres are currently piloting an oral health screening tool. Liverpool's higher than average infant mortality rates are also being targeted through the children's centres' strategy including additional resources for ante-natal care, anti-smoking and breastfeeding support.

There is a clear childhood obesity action plan, with challenging 2009 targets, which includes increasing levels of physical activity where good progress is already being made. In a context of good overall progress in reducing teenage conceptions, rates have increased in 2006 and are again close to the peak reached in 2003. The North West Border and Immigration Asylum screening unit is based in Liverpool and the authority attribute the rising rate to young, already pregnant, asylum seekers.

There has been good progress towards establishing mental health services for 16–18 year olds which was identified as an area for improvement in the 2006 APA. Protocols for Child and Mental Health Services (CAMHS) are in place and posts are currently being advertised.

Area(s) for development

- Evaluate the impact of targeted health projects on outcomes for children and young people.
- Improve oral health, infant mortality rates and breastfeeding initiation rates.

Staying safe

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.

The council has addressed and made considerable improvement on the areas identified for development in the 2006 APA. Referral rates have increased from 476 last year to 556 per 10,000. The figure is now higher than the national average but remains lower than similar authorities. Effective multi-agency work has enabled thresholds for early intervention and referral to social care to be defined. There has been very good progress in increasing the percentage of core assessments from 17.3 last year to 72.9 in 2006–07. Re-registration rates for children on the Child Protection Register have reduced from 18.7% in 2005–06 to 11.5% in 2006–07. The council has established a stable social care workforce which is expected to promote further improvement. Rates and timeliness of initial assessments have increased to 92% and are considerably higher than for similar authorities or nationally. All child protection cases are allocated to a qualified social worker and reviews are held within timescales. Rates of initial child protection conferences have greatly increased from a low 2005 baseline to 49 per 10,000 which is in line with similar authorities. A high profile multi-agency initiative to prevent, identify and respond to children living with domestic violence has been launched by the Liverpool Safeguarding Children's Board, which is a major factor in a strong multi-agency partnership. The accuracy and use of data has improved this year and routine auditing is in place with management information reports now available for senior managers.

There continues to be good performance on the proportion of children fostered by relatives or friends, which at 22.9% remains higher than similar authorities. Similarly there is good performance on the percentage of older children placed in foster care. More than 20% of looked after children are placed at home with parents or with friends or relatives and this impacts on adoption performance which, at 57%, is lower than nationally and similar authorities. The council reports that there are few children currently awaiting adoptive placements. A clear strategy and targets to tackle placement stability for looked after children are in place. While there has been no net increase of "in house" foster placements during the last year, an active recruitment campaign is currently ongoing with reportedly high levels of enquiries.

The 2006 APA identified transition planning for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities as an area for improvement. In response, action by the council has led to strong multi-agency partnerships to support transition between different school phases for children with disabilities and/or learning difficulties. However, whilst the number of completed transition plans in the last year shows improvement, performance remains below similar authorities and nationally.

Area(s) for development

- Improve placement stability for looked after children and young people.
- Improve adoption rates.
- Improve outcomes for children and young people who are placed at home.

Enjoying and achieving

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. Take-up of nursery education and childcare is high in some areas of the city and the majority of early years settings and schools are providing effective education, care and services to meet the needs of learners. Children's starting points on entry to settings and schools are low and most enter Key Stage 1 with communication, language and literacy skills below those expected for their age. Standards at the end of Key Stage 1 are broadly in line with national averages, although improving writing remains an area for development. Intensive challenge and support by the council has led to standards continuing to rise steadily at Key Stage 2 and faster at Key Stage 3 and 4. Standards are in line with similar authorities at the end of these key stages although they remain below the national average.

Outcomes for the oldest pupils continue to improve at a faster pace than nationally and this is most marked at GCSE; 55% of young people achieved five or more A* to C grades in 2006. However, two thirds of young people do not achieve English and mathematics at grades A*–C and the proportion of young people who left school with at least one GCSE is below the average for similar authorities and well below national averages. Unpublished data for 2007 indicates that an improving trend in standards is being sustained. Overall achievement rates are also improving. The oldest pupils make significant progress between Key Stage 2 to GCSE. The rate of progress is generally well above the national average.

The majority of Black and minority ethnic groups make satisfactory progress in meeting targets set for them. The authority has responded purposefully to tackle the low attainment of Somali and Yemeni groups and has increased provision and support to these groups to develop literacy skills and particularly language acquisition for recently arrived asylum seekers. Most other children and young people who are vulnerable to not achieving their full potential make at least comparable and often better progress than their peers. Children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make good progress. Raising educational standards and achievement to enable all young people to benefit from the increasing study opportunities and economic growth in the city remains a key priority in the council's planning.

Results of a recent survey, carried out with over 1000 children and young people in the area, showed that on the whole they enjoy school, try their best and want to study hard. This view is supported by school inspections where almost all children and young people are judged to enjoy school. This generally very positive picture reflects the high achievement, mentioned earlier and the momentum noted in the 2006 APA letter which is improving outcomes well. The number of schools causing concern is gradually decreasing: no school required special measures in 2006 and 2007. Four schools have been removed from categories of concern and only two have required a notice to improve during this period. This compares well to similar authorities and the average nationally. This has been achieved despite a temporary reduction of staff in the school improvement team. Focused work to assess and improve attendance amongst some vulnerable groups has continued. Attendance amongst Black and ethnic minority groups is higher than the average across the city and young people with persistent absence are beginning to respond positively to targeted support. However, reducing absence remains an area for development because the proportion of authorised absence is high in secondary schools and despite continuing to reduce the proportion of children in public care who miss 25 days of schooling, rates remain high compared to national averages.

Attitudes to learning and behaviour in schools continue to be mostly good or better. Many young people report it is easy to get help if they have difficulties with their work. School inspection evidence shows that children and young people's personal development and provision for their care, guidance and support is mostly good. Exclusions have continued to reduce this year and the trend is firmly established. The authority has maintained good performance in providing tuition to permanently excluded young people.

A wide range of activities support the Capital of Culture celebrations including a well-planned programme of study support, sporting, cultural and youth arts programmes provided throughout the city. Participation is high.

Area(s) for development

- Reduce high rates of authorised absence in secondary schools.
- Ensure all children in public care attend school regularly.
- Improve the proportion of young people leaving school with at least one GCSE at grades A*–G or equivalent.
- Increase the proportion who leave school with 5+ A*–C including English and mathematics.

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.

There is an innovative and strategic approach to young people's participation and listening to young people's views at both service and strategic levels. City-wide standards for consultation and participation have been adopted and a participation kite mark scheme is being piloted with 16 voluntary organisations. Each sub-group of the Children's Strategic Partnership has an appointed children's champion and relevant executive members have their responsibilities in this area incorporated into job descriptions. It is now established that young people contribute to staff recruitment, including recently in the secure unit. There are examples of services developing and responding to the views of children and young people, including children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, however, formal evaluation of the outcomes for young people as a result of their participation is not yet well developed.

There is a generally good range of participation activities to enable looked after children to contribute to decision-making. For example, a participation group has written a guide for looked after children, and they have also been involved in the recruitment of foster carers. Looked after children are involved in various consultation exercises including those around bullying and the Children and Young People's Plan. The council has identified that not all contributions to reviews are being accurately recorded, (2006 data, 68%) and is addressing this through staff training and the formation of a working group, which includes looked after children, to address both the quality and recording of young people's contribution to their reviews.

The council has a unified and strategic approach to tackling anti-social behaviour with positive outcomes for communities and young people. Final warnings and cautions for looked after children have risen slightly but are still in line with similar councils and national figures. This is being jointly addressed with police partners as conflicting initiatives and criminal justice targets appear to have resulted in young people entering the formal justice system at an early stage. The Youth Offending Service has undertaken some focused work on looked after children who are at risk of offending. Young people who are identified as being at high risk of offending are prioritised for support and joint agency support packages are being developed. However, greater focus on those already in the criminal justice system is required. Building on the experience of previous remand foster care schemes, a revised remand foster care project is currently out to tender.

Area(s) for development

- Audit and evaluate the outcomes for young people as a result of their participation.

- The contribution of looked after children to their reviews.

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 is good. Good strategic structures and processes to support partnership working are established across the city. Increasing numbers of young people are moving between schools and colleges to take up the additional study opportunities. The partnership's review of the quality of the collaboratives indicates a good awareness of their strengths and areas for development.

The authority's work to raise the aspirations of young people is beginning to pay off. Responses from a recent survey of young people show a higher proportion want to study and go onto university compared to the average nationally. An increasing proportion of young people at age 16, teenage parents and young offenders, are choosing to stay on in education, employment and training. Staying on rates are in line with similar authorities but below the national average. The proportion of looked after children and care leavers staying in education, employment and training until the age of 19 continues to improve and rates are above those of similar authorities and the national average.

Good progress has been achieved in the last twelve months in reducing the proportion of young people not in education, employment or training but figures remain high overall and a clear trend of improvement is not fully established. Young people aged 17 and Black and ethnic minority groups are over represented.

A trend of improving attainment and achievement for young people aged 16–18 is established, however the numbers achieving higher level qualifications (Level 2 and 3) by age 19 remains below similar authorities and the national average. The partnership recognises that the development of these higher skills is critical to enabling young people to take advantage of the growth in the city's improving economic opportunities.

Childcare provision continues to be targeted to disadvantaged families through well considered plans based on audit and a good understanding of needs. The service acknowledges the need to do more to monitor the take up of provision of childcare to inform the delivery of services and effectiveness of financial decisions.

Area(s) for development

- Increase attainment of level 2 and level 3 qualifications by age 19.
- Reduce the high proportion of young people not engaged in education, employment or training, and the over representation of Black and minority ethnic groups.

Capacity to improve, including the management of services for children and young people

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The council has good capacity to improve its services for children and young people. Effective senior leadership has been maintained against a background of staffing changes within the directorate and senior leadership team during the year. A strong commitment from officers and effective systems and structures enable operational and strategic working. Corporate support for improving children's services provision is good. Partnership working, particularly with the voluntary sector is substantial and well established.

The authority's review of the Children and Young People's Plan has been thorough. The prioritisation of areas for development, planned actions and alignment of resources are good. Plans reflect a challenging and far reaching ambition to improve outcomes for children and young people. Data and information management systems are more firmly established to check the progress of the extensive range of initiatives and preventative projects. A systematic approach to evaluating the difference that projects and strategies are making to children and young people is not firmly embedded across all services.

Good progress is being made on most fronts to tackle the issues identified in the 2006 APA. For example, workforce planning has improved and the authority has made better use of its resources by reducing staffing vacancies and establishing stable social care teams. The management of child protection and intervention has improved and the authority has had success in reducing the number of failing schools against a background of temporary staffing difficulties in the school improvement team. Low rates of teacher vacancies have been maintained and value added rates in secondary schools show improvement. The authority is continuing to develop its good practice in consulting with service users and takes account of their views to inform decision making and the development of services. However, insufficient progress has been made to tackle the issue of too few looked after children participating in their reviews.

The council has continued to invest resources in the education and care of young people. The high levels of need in the city mean that the cost of some services such as family support remains much higher than for similar authorities and national averages. Resources are well managed. Limited pooling of budgets, for example in purchasing resources for looked after children and joint commissioning of services with health, are now developing. Work to identify cost savings without detracting from service quality, while maintaining high levels of activity, has resulted in savings; for example, in reducing the number of 'out of city' special educational needs placements. Similar exercises are planned to identify savings to reduce the high costs of looked after children placements although they have yet to be implemented. Key challenges remain in budgeting for the sustainability of children's services alongside

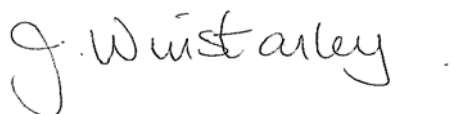
increasing demands on them for example in developing and realigning their work to meet the needs of high numbers of asylum seekers.

Area(s) for development

- Implement a systematic approach to evaluating the impact all projects and strategies have on improving outcomes for all 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