

15 February 2008

Mr Damian Allen
Executive Director of Children's Services
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Education Office
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Dear Mr Allen

2007 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN KNOWSLEY METROPOLITAN BOROUGH 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 analysis stage of the joint area review (JAR). The 2006 APA informed the scoping of the JAR at the planning stage 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 the third Strategic Plan for Knowsley's Children and Young People's Plan, and the evidence and briefings provided by Ofsted and other inspectorates. 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 2

Knowsley Council delivers services for children and young people at an adequate level. The contribution it makes to health, economic wellbeing and positive contribution outcomes are good. Despite some significant strengths in social work practice relating to looked after children, family support, leaving care, fostering and adoption and children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, processes for identifying and assessing risk for some children and young people who may be placed on the child protection register are insufficiently robust. This weakness and the low education attainment of too many children and young people mean that staying safe and enjoying and achieving outcomes are adequate. The council has gained an accurate picture of the strengths and weaknesses of the services available and has embarked on a significant restructuring programme to address the social and economic challenges it faces. The full integration of the Youth Service and the

youth offending team into Children's Services has been managed well. The JAR reported on 'strong and stable senior leadership and a well-motivated and knowledgeable lead member'.

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.

In its recent plans for children and young people the council has put a strong emphasis on reducing longstanding health inequalities. There is a well established partnership with the Primary Care Trust and senior staff from the trust play an important and valued role in decision making. The decision to pool budgets and undertake joint commissioning are clear examples of how the council has effectively encouraged local partners to play their full part in improving health outcomes. Knowsley's Children and Young People's Strategic Plan 2007–2010 provides an accurate assessment of what needs to be done. For example, it acknowledges that dental health outcomes need improvement. The number of five-year-olds with decayed, missing or filled teeth is high compared to national figures. However, during the last five years these rates and those for 11-year-olds have improved at a faster rate than found nationally.

The rates in improving infant and perinatal mortality during the last 10 years have fallen at a faster rate than that found nationally and are better than the England average. The proportion of low birth weight babies has also fallen consistently over the last five years and is now close to the national average. The proportion of mothers who initiate breastfeeding has increased by 4% this year to over 30%. This improvement continues a trend of similar gains in previous years but despite this the rate is still below that of statistical neighbours (46.3%). There has been a 6% increase in the proportion of women smoking during pregnancy this year but despite this the figure is still in line with that of statistical neighbours.

The proportion of children receiving the full course of immunisations before their second birthday is similar to national averages and has been consistent for a number of years. A significant improvement of 7% was achieved last year in the proportion receiving measles, mumps and rubella immunisation. This figure was still below the England average.

The rate of teenage conceptions has historically been lower than other councils in the region. The trend of reduction last year was better than the national and regional rates.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health services (CAMHS) are well developed and waiting times for assessments are better than England averages. The number of young people accessing drug treatment services has improved well; rising from 8.5% in 2006 to 13.4% in March 2007.

The health needs of looked after children and young people are met very well. There is an above average proportion visiting a dentist to have their teeth checked and having an annual health assessment during the previous 12 months.

Areas for development

- Improve dental health for five year olds.
- Increase the number of women breastfeeding.

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. There are examples of good improvement in aspects of the service during the last year with particularly strong performance in services for looked after children and children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. These strengths were acknowledged in the JAR but, at times, processes for identifying and assessing risk for some children and young people who may be placed on the child protection register are insufficiently robust and there was a lack of managerial oversight of case records. The council is working strenuously to improve these aspects by introducing new management arrangements for social care, the commissioning of new procedures, file auditing arrangements, increased monitoring of children subject to a child protection plan and the roll out of the Integrated Children's System (ICS).

Common assessment framework procedures are in place. The Knowsley Safeguarding Children Board is delivering to the national standards. It has ensured safe recruitment policies have been established across all agencies. The multi-agency arrangements to protect children and young people from serious offenders in the community are good and fully consider the risks to children and young people. Protocols have been established if children are missing from school.

The number of referrals of children in need made to council services remains low at 362 per 10,000 population. The percentage of referrals that are repeat referrals within the last 12 months has fallen at a rate similar to the England average but not as rapidly as that found in statistical neighbours. Of the children and young people referred, 68% receive an initial assessment. This proportion is above the England average and is better than found in similar areas. Timescales for initial and core assessments and case conferences remain very good with 83.8% of initial assessments and 84% of core assessments completed on time. The number of children who are the subject of a core assessment has increased but remains low at

51.1 per 10,000 compared with statistical neighbours at 94.9 per 10,000. The council believes that their initial assessment procedures are particularly robust and prevent detailed core assessments being required. The percentage of core assessments completed within 35 working days is very good.

The number of children and young people who became subject to a child protection plan or were on the child protection register rose from 30.2 per 10,000 population in 2005-06 to 41.5 in 2006-07. The number of children and young people placed on the child protection register rose by 37%. This returned Knowsley to registration rates similar to those found in similar areas. There has also been a substantial increase in the numbers deregistered who had been on the child protection register for over two years from 6.5% to 17.5%. This indicates that the backlog of cases is being addressed. All children on the child protection register are reviewed on time and all have an allocated social worker.

A recent fostering report judged Knowsley's fostering services to be outstanding and Knowsley's adoption service is judged as good. Children becoming looked after live in stable placements with only 12% having three or more placements in a year. All looked after children have an allocated social worker and 95% of their reviews take place on time. The number of children adopted has decreased from 8.4% to 5.7% with a drop in the number of children being placed for adoption within 12 months of their best interest decision from 95% to 69%.

Areas for development

- Ensure that the new management arrangements and the roll out of ICS improve the identification and analysis of risk undertaken by social workers for vulnerable children and young people.
- Ensure that arrangements implemented since the JAR improve managerial oversight for all case work.
- Increase the number of children placed for adoption within twelve months of the best interest decision.

Enjoying and achieving

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.

Children receive a good start to their education. The quality of provision provided by early years settings is good overall. More than three quarters of Foundation Stage units inspected during the last year were found to be good or better, with a higher proportion found to be outstanding than in similar councils. There is sufficient childcare provision across the borough with a place available to every child who requests one. The ambitious target of opening 13 children's centres has been

achieved. Despite this very positive work the percentage of children reaching a good level across all areas of development in the Foundation stage has fallen from 68% in 2006 to 60.6% in 2007. The council believes this dip in performance is due to their requirement for more accurate assessments.

At Key Stage 1 children and young people perform less well than in similar areas. In 2006 just over 80% achieved Level 2 in reading compared to 83.7% in similar areas. A similar picture emerged in writing and mathematics. Unvalidated results for 2007 indicate that further falls in performance arose although the trend in mathematics was reversed with a 1% improvement. Significant effort has been given to moderation procedures within the area and the council believes these have produced more accurate and realistic assessments.

Standards at Key Stage 2 are improving. Children and young people's performance fell in English in 2006 but appears to have risen strongly again according to the unvalidated 2007 data. Performance in mathematics and science were in line with those achieved by similar councils in 2006 but, against unvalidated data showed significant improvement in 2007.

The council acknowledges that there is still a large gap between the national results and what young people achieve in Knowsley at Key Stage 3. The percentage achieving the expected level in English in 2006 remained at nearly 56% compared to nearly 74% nationally. Good improvements were achieved in mathematics with nearly a 3.5% improvement in 2006. This figure matches the rate of improvement in similar areas. Improvements in science have been good although results still lag behind those found in similar areas. The overall progress made by pupils from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3 was average.

Good progress has been sustained at Key Stage 4. All secondary schools achieved their floor targets. The percentage of young people gaining five A*–C grades at GCSE level has continued to rise and at 50.4% gave the council its best ever set of results. Nonetheless, this figure is below the national average and that achieved by similar councils but the gap is closing. The percentage of young people achieving five A*–C grades at GCSE level including English and mathematics is very low compared to national figures. It rose slightly in 2006 but not as rapidly as found in similar areas. Unvalidated 2007 figures show further improvements but the gap between Knowsley and other similar areas is still wide. The percentage of young people achieving one A*–G grades at GCSE level also increased and at 95% is the highest for five years. While the rate of progress made by children and young people from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4 is above average, the council acknowledges there is still some way to go to raise attainment.

Attendance rates in primary schools are close to the national average. In secondary schools they are improving but are still well below those found in similar areas. The level of unauthorised absence in some secondary schools is still too high. The behaviour of children and young people is good overall. Exclusions in primary schools

are below average. In secondary schools, the percentage of fixed term exclusions is below that of similar councils but permanent exclusions are above average.

School improvement services have been revised in order to provide greater challenge for schools and this has resulted in more accurate assessments in the Foundation Stage and at Key Stage 1. The proportion of schools categorised as requiring additional support is above average, although there are proportionately fewer schools overall in categories of concern than is the case nationally.

Provision for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is generally good. The proportion of children with a statement of special educational need who gained five A*–C grades at GCSE was above average. The council has increased the number of statements of special educational need completed within statutory timescales. The rate of fixed term exclusions for children and young people with statements in mainstream schools has declined and is below average.

Provision for children and young people educated otherwise than at school is very good. Approximately 97% receive full time education, many of them at a Pupil Referral Unit. Opportunities to extend the minimum entitlement of five hours a week to children and young people educated at home because of medical needs or school phobia are limited by staffing levels and the lack of a suitable teaching base.

The proportion of looked after children in Year 11 who sat one or more GCSE improved at 71.4% and was above the national average. The percentage of looked after children leaving care with at least one GCSE at grade A*–G also rose to 59.1%. This figure is above the national average. There are good levels of achievement in the most recent group of looked after children in Year 11. However, the attendance of looked after children declined in 2006 and was below average.

Areas for development

- Improve attendance particularly in secondary schools.
- Improve the rate of progress children and young people make at Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 3.
- Improve attainment at GCSE, especially those achieving A*–C with English and maths.

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. An important strength is the good quality and widespread consultation with children and young people about decisions that affect them. There are many examples of how children and young peoples' views have contributed to changes in service delivery. Representative groups of children and

young people have been closely consulted about the remodelling of secondary education and this has resulted in changes in design and approach. The council has carefully considered steps to consult and involve its small and diverse Black and minority ethnic community.

Inspection evidence shows that learners in primary and secondary schools make a good and often outstanding contribution to the community. In special schools it is outstanding. School councils and the Knowsley Youth Parliament are very well established. A recent national survey indicated that more young people feel they have the opportunity to contribute to their community than found nationally.

The ratio of youth workers to children and young people has improved and is now much better than the national average. The council has sought to tackle aspects of anti-social behaviour through the targeted provision of leisure facilities, such as the careful choice of sites for multi-purpose games facilities. This has been further supported by granting free access to some leisure facilities and free transport for children to swimming pools in the holidays. However, there has been a rise in the rate of children and young people who enter the youth justice system for the first time. This is as a result of a change in police policy and the increased use of fixed penalty notices for small misdemeanours. Despite this change in policy the number of first time offenders remains below that of statistical neighbours. For those young people within the youth justice system rates of re offending have reduced from 59.5% to 54.4%. The level of participation in reviews by looked after children and young people remains very good at 100%.

Area for development

- Ensure that the impact on children and young people is understood by all partners when changes in policies are planned.

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 overall. The council acknowledges in the Strategic Plan that 33% of children live in households where none of the adults are employed and that concerted effort over a period of time is necessary to tackle associated issues. It has provided significant impetus to improve outcomes at an impressive rate for many older young people during the last year. It has also embarked on an ambitious secondary school transformation strategy to tackle some entrenched issues. Despite this the number of young people entering employment at age 17 without training and the number not in education, employment and training are well above national figures.

The percentage of young people gaining Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications is low, compared to national figures, but Level 2 is improving strongly. In 2006, the proportion achieving Level 2 qualifications rose to 53.1%. This rate of improvement

was twice as rapid as that found nationally and significantly better than that achieved in similar areas. Results for 19 year olds gaining Level 3 qualifications are improving at a similar rate to the national and statistical neighbour figures.

Opportunities for vocational education are wide ranging and well-promoted through the close collaboration that exists between the local college and schools. The 14–19 strategy and implementation plan are well embedded and provision is carefully monitored by the 14–19 strategy group. The overall success rate for young people involved in work based learning is close to the national average and improved at a much faster rate than found nationally. This is impressive. As is the take up and completion of apprenticeships. Very good progress has been made towards the collective delivery of vocational diplomas. Effective strategies, such as the online 16–19 prospectus, exist for young people, parents and carers to gain information and good advice about courses.

The proportion of 16- to 18-year-olds not in education, employment or training in 2006-7 was above average for similar areas at 13.7%. The proportion of young people who continue in learning after completing Year 11 is higher than that of similar councils despite a slight decline in 2006-7. The proportion of young people for whom it is not known if they are in employment, education or training is also above the national average. The number of teenage mothers not in education, employment or training has decreased and now is similar to national figures. However, the number of young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities not in education, employment or training has increased since 2005 and is now above the national average. The council is rightly concerned about this.

Schools make a good contribution to children and young people's understanding of economic well-being. Provision for young people aged 16–19 with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in special schools is outstanding. Current success rates in work related learning for young people with learning disabilities and/or disabilities are very good.

Looked after children and young people are well supported. Almost all who were in Year 11 in 2006 were offered work-based learning opportunities. Care leavers are also well supported. The proportion of this group in employment, education or training has risen and is now well above the national figure. All care leavers aged 19 are in education, employment and training. This is significantly better than the national picture and that found in similar areas. Care leavers at age 19 are settled in suitable accommodation. However, the provision of suitable housing for young people in the area is limited. The council is planning with local partners to increase the volume of locally available housing for homeless young people.

Childcare facilities are well distributed across the council area and there are sufficient places for all children to receive a place if they request one. Strenuous efforts are made to ensure parents are well informed about these facilities and available benefits. Courses to promote family literacy are run in a number of primary schools.

Areas for development

- Reduce the proportion of young people not engaged in education, training and development.
- Improve the percentage of young people achieving Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications.

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

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The capacity of the council to improve its services for children and young people is good. The senior management of children's services has been reorganised and has quickly gained an accurate picture of the strengths and weaknesses of the available services. The JAR reported on 'effective and stable senior leadership and a well-motivated and knowledgeable lead member'. The third review of the Strategic Plan for Children and Young People is ambitious and clearly identifies what needs to be improved. It draws on the views of children and young people and provides realistic timescales for introducing initiatives. Important decisions to fully integrate the council's youth services and youth offending team in to Children's Services have been managed well. Support by councillors for Children's Services remains very strong. The council realises it needs to maintain its current rate of improvement to ensure historical weaknesses are properly addressed.

The council has achieved many strong indicators in social care but acknowledges that some social work assessment and risk management practice requires further improvement. It has tackled this issue robustly through strong leadership and management action from within the council drawing on support from many local partners, particularly from within the Primary Care Trust. A firm line has been taken with schools regarding the accuracy of their assessments in national tests. This has affected results recently. The council acknowledges that it has more to do to improve educational outcomes but there are some important signs of improvement. Good progress has been made in reducing the number of teacher and social work vacancies. The number of days lost to sickness has been reduced and is below average. There are no recruitment and retention difficulties in key groups of social care staff. All staff working with children in need are suitably qualified. Some workforce remodelling still needs to be implemented but good progress is being made in directing resources towards these priorities.

The council has ambitious yet realistic plans to remodel the secondary school landscape through the Building Schools for the Future programme. Consultation on this project has been widespread and based on informative training about the educational choices offered. Action has been taken to successfully reduce the number of surplus primary school places. The council is also involved in a national pilot for the rebuilding of primary schools. Partnership working is a strong feature

particularly at senior management level. Very effective links have been created with the Primary Care Trust and this has resulted in some strong improvements in health outcomes.

Areas for development

- Monitor the impact of restructured services to address social and economic challenges.
- Provide further impetus to improve outcomes in schools.

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