

26 November 2007

Mr Patrick Leeson
Strategic Director of Learning and Children's Services
Royal Borough of Kingston-upon-Thames
Room 127
Guildhall 2
High Street
Kingston-upon-Thames KT1 1EU

Dear Mr Leeson

2007 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE ROYAL BOROUGH OF KINGSTON-UPON-THAMES

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, your action plan arising from the joint area review and the evidence and briefings provided by Ofsted, other inspectorates and relevant bodies. The letter comments on progress since the recent joint area review. 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 4

The Royal Borough of Kingston-upon-Thames consistently delivers well above minimum requirements for users. The council has responded well to the recommendations raised in the joint area review report and has made good progress since that time. It has maintained excellent outcomes for children and young people in enjoying and achieving and in their economic well-being, and improved outcomes from good to outstanding in staying safe and making a positive contribution. The contribution the council makes towards improving outcomes for being healthy remains good. There is clear evidence that the council has continued to make improvements following the joint area review. For example, there is better service delivery for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people. Working with health partners remains strong with the strengthening of strategies to work in an integrated way. There is a very strong commitment to improving all services and an outstanding capacity for this to happen.

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. No recommendations emerged from the joint area review.

Partnership working continues to be strong at both strategic and operational levels. Health outcomes meet most national targets. A Tellus2 survey of children and young people in Kingston-upon-Thames indicates that a greater proportion eat more healthily, smoke less and have not used drugs compared to the national average. Access to sexual health services has improved and is well integrated with the youth service. A new mobile outreach facility is reaching more children and young people, providing advice, information and condom distribution. The local authority has plans in place to link chlamydia screening and the comparatively high levels of diagnosis to national improvement targets. The rate of teenage pregnancies has fallen and is on target to achieve the agreed level of national reduction. There is an obesity strategy in place and satisfactory progress is being made against local targets.

There is a strong focus on promoting health in the authority's schools and the development of co-located integrated services. As a result, schools are well engaged in the achievement of the healthy schools standard and progress against the national target is very good. Where this accreditation has been achieved, sex and relationship education in schools is good. However, about half of the secondary schools do not have compliant sex and relationship education policies.

Agencies are working well to promote mental health and reduce substance misuse. Good progress has been made towards achieving a comprehensive Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and assessments of vulnerable children and young people are completed on time. However, protocols that provide access to 24-hour specialist mental health assessments are not yet fully operational. Substance misuse services are effective, with more children receiving specialist treatment and support. The Family and Advice Support Service provides good, preventative support as well as the referral of children and young people who require assessment.

The needs of vulnerable children and young people, including those who are looked after, are met well. Annual health assessments are carried out for the majority of children, with performance well above the national average. Improved access for looked after children and young people to CAMHS has been achieved, for example, through the basing of a therapist in the looked after and leaving care team.

The health needs of children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are met well through good integrated support. Improvements in the waiting times for respite and day care are being successfully promoted through the integration of the current service with mainstream children's services. However, waiting times for speech and language therapy are too long and the access to occupational therapy and physiotherapy requires improvement.

Areas for development

- Increase the percentage of secondary schools with compliant sex and relationship education policies.
- Improve waiting times and the provision of therapy services.

Staying safe

Grade 4

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 outstanding. Two recommendations emerged from the joint area review in 2006, when staying safe was judged to be good.

For action in the next six months

- In relation to domestic violence, secure improvements in social care practice and the consistent implementation of the *Working Together to Safeguard Children 2006* national guidelines by some community health staff to ensure that children who are affected by domestic violence are referred in line with these guidelines.
- Establish clear structures to enable feedback from the Independent Reviewing Officer service to systematically improve practice.

Both of these recommendations have been dealt with effectively. Outcomes for children and young people are very good, with a sustained trend of improvement of high standards being maintained.

The council has made very good progress in ensuring consistency of practice across agencies that work with children affected by domestic violence. File audits on relevant cases have been undertaken by a sub-group of the Local Safeguarding Children Board. New local procedures have been established, as well as training for key health and social care staff, to provide clearer guidance on dealing with victims of domestic violence and to ensure health visitors' practice is fully compliant with national guidelines. The uptake of training and the implementation of national guidelines is being monitored well by relevant forums.

Stronger and more effective links between the Independent Reviewing Officer and social care teams have been established, with a new service specification in place to improve working links with social care teams. This was developed with the involvement of looked after children and young people. Monitoring has also been improved through a fast track system that enables concerns to be raised with managers and a quarterly liaison meeting, attended by the Head of Service, to ensure that any required developments are implemented.

The council has worked very well with partners to improve community and personal safety in the borough. The number of children and young people killed or seriously injured through road traffic accidents has declined dramatically over a sustained period, at nearly double the rate of improvement seen nationally.

Children and young people most at risk from abuse are well protected by good professional practice and inter-agency collaboration, supported by a good range of effective, well-established preventative services. Child protection has been consistently strong for a number of years. The number of children on the child protection register has increased but is well below the national average with good evidence of effective early intervention and prevention available through Children's Centres, extended schools and clusters. Effectively implemented child protection procedures are well managed and audited. Re-registration and de-registration rates are low due to effective quality assurance processes that ensure performance is underpinned by good practice. All children on the child protection register have an allocated social worker and all cases are reviewed within appropriate timescales. Assessments are carried out in a timely way with very good performance on initial and core assessments, above the national average, and monitored by the council. The council has identified that the recent rise in the number of section 47 referrals is a result of new recording systems that classify all contacts as referrals. Re-referrals have also risen, but remain below the national average. There are already coherent plans in place to deal with these areas.

The Local Safeguarding Children Board is firmly established and partner agencies work well together. All agencies are compliant with the new regulations on safer recruitment. Implementation of the common assessment framework is progressing well with a good number of staff and agencies trained as lead professionals, and a significant number of children are benefiting from multi-agency family support as a result. This early intervention is helping to ensure that numbers of children on the child protection register and becoming looked after remain low.

The proportion of looked after children and young people continues to reduce. Most outcomes are good or very good. All children are allocated a social worker and 91% of reviews are carried out within appropriate timescales, well above similar authorities. Stability of placements is strong and more children are being placed with family and friends. The rate of adoptions is very good. However, the longer term stability of placements is comparatively low and fewer children are placed in foster care or adoptive placements. Although the numbers placed in residential care are higher than the national average, the council attribute this to the high proportion of children and young people with disabilities. Recruitment of more specialist foster carers is under way.

The council is making good progress to enable children and young people with disabilities to live in safe environments and make a smooth transition to adult services. The percentage of children with disabilities who have transition plans in place has increased to over 90%. Family support services are good and improving.

Enjoying and achieving

Grade 4

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 outstanding. No recommendations emerged from the joint area review.

There are significant strengths in outcomes, not least of which are the very high standards of attainment in all key stages, achievement is very good and improving still further. The council is very well aware of gaps in attainment between groups of children, particularly those who are vulnerable. It takes robust action to support relevant schools and, as a result, the attainment gaps are closing. For instance, the percentage of care leavers with at least one GCSE has increased and is much higher than local or national averages. In addition, the gender gap at GCSE has narrowed by 5% and, at Key Stage 2, where the gender gap was already narrower than average, it has improved by 1%.

Provision in the Foundation Stage remains good or better and standards of attainment are above the national average. Early years settings are of good quality and the council provides very good support to child care providers. In particular, the attainment gap between minority ethnic children and all children is being successfully narrowed through the work of the primary strategy consultants.

Looked after children and young people receive tailored support to help them achieve well, particularly at Key Stage 4, and their attendance is within targets; none are excluded from school. Those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities also achieve well because of strong provision in mainstream and special schools. The authority is identified as a hub for effective practice in special educational needs. There have been some concerns relating to the length of time taken to complete statements of special educational needs. However, this is improving because the council has been working successfully with its health partners to speed up the provision of medical reports. In addition, the council provides well-targeted support to all pupils awaiting a statement. There is a low level of exclusions from schools and high overall attendance. Effective systems have been put in place to ensure that the small number of permanently excluded children and young people receive appropriate full-time educational provision.

Making a positive contribution

Grade 4

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 outstanding. Two recommendations emerged from the joint area review.

For action in the next six months

- Ensure that all services and partners who work with children and young people implement the participation strategy.
- Review and improve access to all services for children and young people who are unaccompanied asylum seekers and ensure that all looked after children and young people are aware of opportunities to make a positive contribution and understand the advocacy and complaints service.

The council has made very good progress in embedding the participation strategy across agencies, with many more young people now involved in strategic groups, such as the Children and Young Person's Partnership, Police Consultative Group, Connexions Shadow Board and Kingston Voluntary Action. Consulting young people is an integral part of the commissioning process for contractors and, as a result, children and young people have successfully contributed to service delivery, including involvement in staff appointments, establishment of information youth cafes and a new sports facility. They are directly involved in the management and allocation of funds for sports facilities for disabled young people. There are also stronger links between Kingston Youth Council and individual school councils, successfully helping young people to gain wider involvement in strategic developments. Looked after children and young people are well supported in contributing to their statutory reviews, more than in similar authorities.

The council has made very good progress in improving access to services for unaccompanied asylum seeker children by integrating them with the looked after service and now offers effective and consistent support. For example, several young people are now living independently and have improved living arrangements, including relevant financial support. Access to the complaints process and advocacy support for children and young people has also improved with the appointment of a looked after children participation and development officer, who has ensured that there is very good access to complaints procedures. Representations can now be made by young people through electronic means and complaints are fast tracked for immediate response. Complaints from unaccompanied asylum seekers have reduced since the accommodation strategy was implemented, which has improved responsiveness and choice. Vulnerable groups, including looked after children, are effectively helped to contribute to their reviews with performance above the national average and there is good support at the time of transition.

The number of first time offenders to the youth justice system has risen, but is below similar authorities. Strong individual needs analysis has led to improved targeting, and focused outreach work and the enhanced role of the prevention manager are positive developments to improve outcomes. The Youth Inclusion Support Panel continues to provide an effective preventative and diversionary service. Re-offending rates have increased but this has been addressed well through the improved quality of intervention with individuals and targeting of young people who persistently re-offend. There were no final warnings for looked after children and young people, which is well below similar authorities and the national average. Following the

inspection of the youth offending team, good progress has been made in implementing the improvement plan, including better risk assessment, enforcement and compliance and use of the ASSET assessment profile.

Achieving economic well-being

Grade 4

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 outstanding. No recommendations emerged from the joint area review.

High standards in basic skills, excellent GCSE results and growing 14-19 vocational provision all help children and young people to prepare very well for their working lives. Vulnerable young people are tracked and supported very effectively with almost all in education, employment or training, and particularly so for those from minority ethnic backgrounds (93.5%) and young offenders (90%). For instance, the proportion of young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities not in education, employment or training has reduced by nearly one quarter and is now below average. Provision in special schools is consistently good or better and, together with effective transition plans, enables children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to make very effective preparation for the next stage of their education and beyond. Looked after young people have very good support in progressing to adult life through clear pathways to continuing education or training, where participation rates exceed statistical neighbour and national averages.

The council has worked effectively to improve the availability of affordable child care, particularly for those children who are disabled. Progress on the provision of children's centres is good. The proportion of children living in benefit claiming households is well below statistical neighbour and national averages.

There has been much greater local co-operation in the provision of vocational pathways for young people, resulting in high levels of participation and much success in A-level and Level 2 and 3 courses. Here, standards are much higher than in similar authorities and nationally. This partnership work with secondary schools and further education colleges is enabling robust plans to be made for extending choice through applied diplomas. Young people are well served by an effective youth service where provision is targeted closely to need and the views of the users are used regularly to inform strategy and evaluate provision. Careers advice is good.

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

Grade 4

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The council's capacity to improve its services for children and young people is outstanding, and its management of these services is outstanding. Two recommendations emerged from the joint area review.

For action in the next six months

- Implement a co-ordinated joint commissioning function as soon as health budgets for children's services have been identified.

For action in the longer term

- Review the commissioning arrangements to improve access for children and young people with social and communication learning difficulties and/or disabilities to therapy and equipment services.

The council has made good progress in developing an appropriate model for establishing a co-ordinated joint commissioning function with the health service. Kingston Primary Care Trust has confirmed its budget for children's services as part of the resource allocation for the Children and Young People's Plan. There is a strong commitment from health partners to establish a new co-ordinated joint commissioning function and integrated management arrangements by April 2008 with the formation of a joint commissioning team. Already, a newly commissioned, fully integrated service for disabled children, including a pooled budget, has been agreed.

Access to therapy and equipment services for children with social and communication learning difficulties has been reviewed and good progress has been made in improving commissioning arrangements. Early support and integrated pathways for autistic children has enabled a more effective response to referrals with an assessment action plan for each child. More children with autistic spectrum disorders are being referred and awaiting diagnosis, with waiting times now reduced to an estimated 12 months, but the council recognises that this time could be reduced still further. Access to speech and language services has been improved through more effective commissioning of mainstream school services.

The excellent Children and Young People's Plan 2007/8 includes all the recommendations from the joint area review and those from the Children's Trust. It is monitored very well and robust evaluations of progress are made against clear criteria for success. The council knows its strengths and areas for development very clearly, leading to priorities that are well focused on making a difference to the well-being of children and young people. The track record of improvement, evident over several years, has been sustained very well and is having a positive impact on outcomes for children and young people. For example, the excellent standards of

attainment in primary and secondary schools have been built upon and no schools are currently in an Ofsted category of concern. In addition, the number of looked after children and young people has fallen due to good preventative services and is below that in similar authorities.

Workforce development is a strength, with very clear development priorities in the Children and Young People's Plan. The integrated education and social care workforce development team has had a significant impact on recruitment, retention and staff development. Low vacancies and turnover, and high expenditure on training and development, compare well with statistical neighbours. There is robust leadership, established effective partnership working and efficient use of resources. The commitment to improving services is very strong and the council is very well placed to bring these about. Financial management is good, particularly in the context of significant budget pressures, so that frontline services for children and young people are protected.

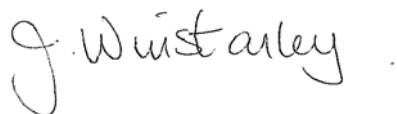
Area for development

- Implement the new joint commissioning arrangements as planned.

Overall, the council has demonstrated good progress in meeting the joint are review recommendations and has shown strong capacity to maintain and improve further its services for 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 black 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