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17 December 2008

Mr Paul Curran
Director of Children's Services
Islington Council
159 Upper Street
London
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Dear Mr Curran

Annual performance assessment of services for children and young people in Islington Council 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.

Assessment judgement area	APA grade
Overall effectiveness of children's services	3
Being healthy	3
Staying safe	3
Enjoying and achieving	3
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

Islington Council provides services which consistently deliver above minimum requirements. Services are well led and managed with good partnership arrangements. In consequence, there have been improvements in several areas since the 2007 APA. The majority of recommendations made in the 2007 APA have been well addressed. For example, the council has much better information now about how effectively its children’s centres reach the most vulnerable families. The very effective school improvement service is now responsible for the centres and has brought increased rigour to their management. The council is increasingly successful in narrowing the gap in a number of key areas, such as educational attainment and outcomes for looked after children. In some other areas, however, outcomes have fallen or the impact of services has been limited despite their having been improvement priorities. One key example is the reduction in the proportion of young people aged 16 to 18 who are in education, employment or training. Another is the low rate of reduction in teenage pregnancy.

In its self evaluation, the council argued that its 2008 APA grades should increase from 2007 in four out of the seven judgement areas. In taking this view, it rightly noted that its overall direction of travel is positive, but took too little account of how Islington’s children and young people fare when compared with those in other areas, especially similar councils. These comparisons are not as favourable as the self-evaluation grades would suggest, and, despite improvements within grade boundaries, are insufficient to move the council into higher grades. The APA grades awarded are the same as in 2007.

Being healthy

Grade 3

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good and there have been improvements since the 2007 APA. However, performance is not considerably better than comparable councils. The council’s analysis of its strengths and areas for development for this outcome area underestimate some weaknesses. The table below sets out the evidence for the grade awarded.

Major strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) is well regarded. Waiting times have reduced. Partnership working between agencies is strong and there is very productive involvement of young people and their parents in developing services. ▪ Health care support for looked after children is good. The council’s performance on health checks for looked after children continues to be much better than the national average. ▪ There has been very good performance in increasing the proportion of mothers initiating breast-feeding and the local figure is now significantly higher than the average in both similar areas and nationally.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The rate of reduction in teenage conceptions is poor by comparison with the majority of similar councils. The council has made this a priority area following the 2007 APA but has not provided evidence of notably better outcomes. ▪ The rate of relevant young people engaged in treatment for substance misuse is significantly lower than the London average. |
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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 for this outcome area overvalue the areas where progress has been made. The table below sets out the evidence for the grade awarded.

Major strengths

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The child protection service is effective. The number of children who had previously been subject to a child protection plan dropped for a third year and is better than the national average and that of similar councils. ▪ The number of looked after children has reduced for a fourth year in succession and is comparable to similar councils. More children in care have been given friends and family placements. Performance in this area is comparable to the average for similar councils and nationally. The use of residential provision for looked after children has reduced notably. Performance in this area is better than similar councils. ▪ The rate of reduction in the level of deaths and serious injuries of children in road traffic accidents is considerably higher than the English average. |
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Important weaknesses and areas for development

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The reasons for the rising levels of re-referrals and the significant increase in core assessments are not understood by the council. ▪ Too many young people over 14 with disabilities have no transition plan. This figure has not improved over the last four years. |
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Enjoying and achieving

Grade 3

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. This is in line with the council's self-assessment. The council's analysis of the main strengths and areas for development in this outcome area is consistent with the evidence.

Major strengths

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Highly effective, inventive and carefully targeted school improvement service which has schools' confidence and balances short and longer term development |
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needs very well.

- Continuing and notable improvement in school standards and achievement over several years, from a very low base, in most subjects and key stages.
- The proportion of schools graded good or better is higher than the national average and there are no schools in Ofsted categories of concern.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- Despite improvements, 2007 school standards at Key Stages 1, 3 and 4 were below those in similar councils.
- Attendance in primary schools has continued to improve but remains lower than similar councils. Secondary school attendance has fallen and is comparable to similar councils.

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 the main strengths and areas for development in this outcome area is consistent with the evidence.

Major strengths

- Very good consultation and engagement with children and young people, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.
- Good and improving participation by looked after children in planning and reviewing the provision made for them.
- Good and improving numbers of young people reached by the youth service, following the 2007 APA recommendation.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- Re-offending rates have risen, and are above the average for similar councils.

Achieving economic well-being

Grade 2

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate, as it was at the 2007 APA. Despite some progress since then, the council's analysis of its strengths and areas for development in this outcome area underestimates the importance of some areas where outcomes have deteriorated.

Major strengths

- The 14–19 education partnership is well-established and improving, including links with City and Islington College. It makes clear and accurate analysis of the needs of young people and this shows in a much improved and better targeted strategic plan aimed at raising educational outcomes. Diploma provision is

appropriate to need and suitably planned.

- The proportion of care leavers in education, employment or training by age 19 has been consistently high over the last 4 years. It is notably above London averages.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- The overall proportion of young people aged 16 to 18 who are not in education, employment and training has risen, and is now higher than that in similar councils and the Inner London average. This is particularly so for some groups, including teenage mothers, young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, supervised juveniles and white young people.
- The proportion of young people achieving qualifications at Level 2 and Level 3 by age 19, whilst improving (rapidly at Level 2), remains below that of similar councils. In the small number of schools with sixth forms, average points scores at A level have declined and are well below similar councils.

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 is good and its management of these services is good. The Director of Children's Services and his senior team are strongly dedicated to and ambitious for, the young people and communities of Islington. They give staff the confidence to pursue often innovative ideas in seeking to reach the council's clearly stated strategic priorities. Services are well resourced. Gross expenditure on services per capita under 18 is the highest of the comparator group and well above the average in similar councils. The partnership between the council and Cambridge Education, who provide most education services, is highly developed and effective. Since the 2007 APA, the coherence of planning systems has increased, leading to improvements in many areas. Nevertheless, there have been some important areas where, despite being given emphasis, outcomes have fallen or remain too low. The council has not taken enough account of this in its ongoing self-evaluation. The effectiveness of a small number of services or initiatives has not been reviewed and improved rapidly enough.

Major strengths

- Senior officers and children's services staff are led well by the Director of Children's Services who, with elected councillors, provides clear direction.
- The Children's Services Management Team ensures that overarching priorities are clearly linked, through effective planning and performance management systems, to the operational level. Young people are consulted well. This effective synthesis of leadership and management provides consistency and clarity across the council and its partners.
- There have been several improvements since the last APA in processes and outcomes across children's services.

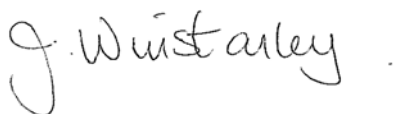
Important weaknesses and areas for development

- The council's 2008 APA self evaluation took much account of activity and improvement but too little account of overall outcomes compared with the national picture and similar councils, leading to a lack of rigour in assessing the level of success reached.
- The council has been too slow to analyse and respond to some emerging indicators showing concern. These include data showing the rise in the proportion of young people not in education, employment or training and the significant rise in core assessments.

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". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small dot at the end.

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager
Local Services Inspection