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Mr John Harris
Director of Children, Schools and Families
Hertfordshire County Council
County Hall
Pegs Lane
Hertford
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Dear Mr Harris

Annual performance assessment of services for children and young people in Hertfordshire County 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	2
Staying safe	2
Enjoying and achieving	3
Making a positive contribution	2
Achieving economic well-being	3
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

Hertfordshire County Council provides a service that consistently delivers above minimum requirements for children and young people. It demonstrates innovative practice and is increasingly cost effective while offering significant contribution to wider outcomes for the community. Services are making a discernible difference to the lives of most children and young people and are narrowing the gap in terms of the outcomes for those who are the most vulnerable.

The council and its partners have made significant strides in eliminating the weaknesses in safeguarding and the provision for looked after children highlighted in the 2007 JAR and APA. All aspects of the council’s work in these two key areas are satisfactory and some are particularly effective. The management of services is good and the council’s good capacity to improve is clearly and repeatedly demonstrated. Since the 2007 JAR and APA the pace of change and the improvements secured in less than a year have been a notable achievement.

One of the keys to this improvement has been the very successful introduction of a purpose built information technology system. The clear and accurate data this provides has allowed managers to improve provision across a wide spectrum of the council’s social services, enabling senior officers to track performance and to hold section leaders to account effectively.

The broad and effective range of educational services provided are exemplified in the manner in which the introduction of the new diploma system has been managed through the 14–19 local consortia, and by the very low proportion of young people who are not involved in education, employment or training. Progress has been made across all service outcomes due to the impact of good performance management.

Further work is required to ensure that the improvements in children’s social care are secure and sustainable; on the remaining inconsistencies in young people’s mental health services and to improve the educational outcomes of some minority ethnic groups.

Being healthy

Grade 2

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

Major strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Good contribution to enabling learners to be healthy. Almost 90% of schools were judged in inspections to be making a good contribution to this aspect; nearly twice the national average. ▪ The rate of teenage pregnancy remains below that of both its statistical neighbours and the national average. The rate of reduction of such pregnancies

also exceeded similar councils and the national figures.

- The vast majority of schools are involved in the Healthy Schools Programme and the target for achieving Healthy School status was exceeded in March 2008.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- The council's reliance on out of area placements remains above that of its statistical neighbours. However, new joint arrangements between the council and its partners are beginning to have an impact on outcomes.
- Young people's access to child and adolescent mental health services is not yet fully developed. New initiatives, for example in counselling, the eating disorder service, challenging behaviour and a school-based pilot on emotional resilience are not yet well-established.
- The number of children who are looked after who received their annual health check was below that of similar councils in the last data year.

Staying safe

Grade 2

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

Major strengths

- The quick action to improve arrangements for safeguarding children and young people.
- The Local Safeguarding Children Board has been strengthened. There are now systematic criminal records bureau (CRB) procedures in place. A robust and effective information technology system leading to improved tracking of performance and greater accountability.
- The council fostering agency was inspected in March 2008 and judged to be good, with strengths noted in procedures and rising numbers of looked after children in foster care or placed for adoption.
- All eight council children's homes were judged to be good or outstanding. Three of the council's four residential special schools were judged to be outstanding, and one was judged to be satisfactory.
- The eligibility criteria for children's social care have been clarified through joint work between partner agencies resulting in reduced referral rates.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- Transition planning for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities remains inconsistent.
- The range of the respite care available to families is underdeveloped.
- Inconsistencies in the timeliness of initial and core assessments.

- Weaknesses in family support and preventative services have contributed to a higher than average number of children and young people being looked after by the council. The recently established Multi-Agency Support Teams and the developing Family Intervention and Support Service are already making a difference but it is too early to see significant impact.

Enjoying and achieving

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

- Standards and achievement for the youngest children to those aged 16 are above those of similar councils and the national average.
- The work of school improvement partners and the good council support for schools causing concern. The proportion of schools in a category of concern is below that of both similar councils and the national figure.
- Effective key stage learning and educational support centres has led to improved outcomes for the most vulnerable children and young people.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- Variations in the performance of some minority ethnic groups.
- Low standards in the small number of less effective schools.

Making a positive contribution

Grade 2

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

Major strengths

- The engagement of young people in decisions about local services, for example, the redevelopment of local educational facilities.
- The extensive range of and take up by young people of voluntary activities, such as the significant numbers of young people involved in Duke of Edinburgh Awards and other youth groups.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- The proportion of looked after children participating in their reviews, although improving remains below that of similar councils and the national figure.
- Weaknesses in the youth service ability to reach young people have only been recently addressed by a merger with the effective Connexions service.

Achieving economic well-being

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>Major strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The well managed introduction of the new diploma pathways via the effective 14–19 consortia. ▪ The significant numbers of looked after children who progress to higher education. ▪ The very low proportion of young people not involved in education, employment and training, the second most effective performance in England. ▪ The improvements made to the accommodation strategy, transition arrangements, and personal education plans of looked after children.
<p>Important weaknesses and areas for development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The educational outcomes of a small number of lower achieving sixth forms.

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 council has responded very positively to the outcomes of the 2007 JAR and APA. Senior officers have provided effective leadership for children's services. The ambitions of the council and its partners are realistic but challenging.

The priorities set by the 2007 JAR and refined with support from consultants and the Department for Children's Schools and Families give significant attention to the full range of equality and diversity issues. The Children and Young People's Plan includes a realistic identification of the resources required. The council has been innovative in the way it has sought to improve provision through partnership working e.g. by linking the effective Connexions service with the under-resourced and struggling youth service. Decision making is transparent, timely and robust.

The council has provided additional funds to address the weaknesses identified in the 2007 JAR and APA whilst maintaining a strategic focus on value for money.

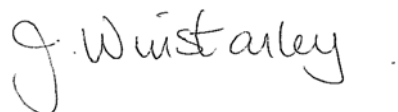
Significant staff training and reorganisation have been combined with key appointments to the middle tier staff. Regular, robust monitoring and evaluation have improved performance management processes and secured real service enhancement in a short period of time.

Major strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ The strength of performance management.▪ The effectiveness of change management has facilitated the progress made since the 2007 JAR and APA.▪ The leadership of education services.
Important weaknesses and areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ The recent improvements in some areas of social and educational provision have yet to be embedded.▪ The below average outcomes of some minority ethnic groups.

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 blue 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