

26 November 2007

Ms Sharon Menghini
Director of Children's Services
Herefordshire Council
Children's Services Directorate
Brockington
35 Hafod Road
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Dear Ms Menghini

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

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 where it was available, and the evidence and briefings provided by Ofsted, other inspectorates and relevant bodies. 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 2

Herefordshire Council delivers adequate services for children overall. Children's services are making good contributions to improving the educational achievement and health of children and young people. Provisions for safeguarding children, involving them in their community and equipping them for future prosperity are adequate.

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.

Most children and young people consider themselves to be healthy, according to the Tellus2 survey. Children have a good start with a higher proportion of mothers breastfeeding than nationally. Although numbers of infant mortalities and babies with low birth weights have increased recently and are higher than national averages, perinatal mortality rates are lower than the average. A review of the underlying factors has revealed no significant pattern of concern. Immunisation rates are consistent with national averages. Improving the oral health of children and young people remains a key priority for the council and its partners. The introduction of a

fluoridation process is being actively considered. In the interim, all children and young people requiring dental care are prioritised.

All schools are engaged in the Healthy Schools programme and 68% have achieved Healthy Schools Status. Programmes address local priorities including obesity, substance misuse and sexual health. Services to reduce teenage pregnancy are well coordinated and centred on schools. The number of teenage pregnancies is low and reducing, although the national target of a 50% reduction is difficult when starting from a low percentage. Provision has increased to reduce the level of obesity which at 12% is consistent with the national average. Improved joint working arrangements to combat substance misuse have led to substantially higher numbers of young people receiving treatment. Provision is addressing alcohol misuse, which contributes to high numbers of hospital admissions.

Very good progress has been made on provision of a comprehensive Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). Waiting times for assessment and treatment have reduced and compare well with national targets. Provision for children and young people who are looked after, young offenders and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is good. Arrangements have been strengthened to ensure safe care for young people requiring hospital treatment. Transfers to externally commissioned CAMHS beds are arranged quickly following local emergency admissions. Access and services for looked after children are very good with health assessments being maintained at a high level of 90%. Newly integrated services for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities promote earlier identification and support.

Area(s) for development

- Improve dental health of children and young people.

Staying safe

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate.

The council have maintained the improved safeguarding arrangements identified in the previous APA, but some weaknesses remain to be addressed. There are some good features. Parents and carers have good access to information and guidance on helping them to keep their children safe. The Tellus2 survey notes that more children and young people report that they feel safe in Herefordshire than nationally. Arrangements to combat bullying have been strengthened and the numbers of children killed or seriously injured on roads are reducing.

Thresholds for service have been reviewed, are understood across agencies and have resulted in higher numbers of children receiving support. Numbers of referrals to social care services have increased significantly, as has the proportion of referrals

that lead to initial assessments. Performance against timescales for initial and core assessments fell during the year to levels below national and comparable council averages. Improving these timescales remains a challenge for the council. Plans to fully implement the Common Assessment Framework and the Integrated Children System are progressing well. The council has delayed full implementation beyond April 2008, appropriately, to ensure connectivity with the new and wider ranging Herefordshire Connects system.

Compliance with requirements for allocation of child protection cases and timeliness of reviews are very good. However, the proportion of child protection investigations that lead to initial child protection conferences within 15 days is below national and comparable councils' averages.

The effectiveness of the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Board has been enhanced through new appointments of a business manager and a permanent training manager. Good progress has been made on training provision and the development of new joint safeguarding procedures with neighbouring authorities. However, the Board has been slow to respond to requirements for auditing of compliance with safe recruiting practices across agencies and to improve provision to combat domestic violence, which remains a weak area. Additional funding has recently been secured in order to appoint an independent chair and increase strategic capacity.

Arrangements to support looked after children are good. Placement stability is good, as is the quality of care provided in foster placements. All looked after children are allocated to a qualified social worker. The number of children adopted fell in 2006–07 although completion of adoption proceedings was timely. Planning and provision, including accommodation options, for young people leaving care is very good. Integrated service provision for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities has led to more families having access to short breaks and support, and to better transition planning for young people moving into adult social care provision.

Area(s) for development

- Increase compliance with timescales for initial and core assessments.
- Improve services to combat domestic violence.
- Complete audit of compliance with safe recruitment practice across agencies.

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.

Outcomes for children and young people are better than at the previous APA primarily because of a substantial improvement in educational standards at Key Stage 4 since 2005. Standards in 2006 were above average, significantly better than in 2005, and showed above average value-added. Indicative data for 2007 support the continuing upward trend. Almost every young person in the authority gains at least one GCSE or equivalent qualification, which is noticeably better than almost all other authorities. Educational outcomes for looked after children, and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, are also good in comparison with other authorities. In 2006, Key Stage 3 performance was better than nationally, and similar to statistical neighbours.

Key Stage 2 results in 2006 were lower than expected overall, because of an unexpected dip in mathematics, but nevertheless were still in line with national averages. Unvalidated 2007 data show improved standards of attainment in mathematics, because the local authority has been effective in using individual school performance data to target explicit support where it was most needed. Standards at Key Stage 1 have been slightly decreasing over time, again indicative data for 2007 continues this trend, although they remained above the national averages for reading and mathematics in 2006, with writing the weaker of the three measures. The local authority had already identified a shortfall in writing and instituted guided writing programmes. It has considered a number of possible causes behind these Key Stage 1 figures and eliminated obvious factors, for example the accuracy of teacher assessments. No single cause is responsible, and based on the success of guided reading programmes the local authority is confident that a similar focus on writing will be effective.

The Foundation Stage profile data show a slight decline although it remains broadly similar to national averages. The LA attributes this to much better assessment practice, not to a real decline. There are more places for young children in early years settings, and the local authority has met targets to provide childcare support for young mothers.

Overall school attendance matches the national value, with relatively low unauthorised absence in primary schools contrasting with recently increased figures in the secondary sector to above the national average. The causes are known and are the focus of intense local authority support in specific schools. Permanent exclusions are slightly below national figures; although they have risen in the primary sector numbers are very small.

Inspection data for schools since the previous APA show a marked and welcome increase in the proportion judged to be good or better. In particular, personal development and well-being are very good as a result of explicit support from the authority's 'Values' education programme. Two schools have a notice to improve, a further one has been removed and there are no schools in special measures.

Children and young people say they enjoy school and inspection judgements show that in almost every school pupil enjoyment is good. However, a high proportion of children and young people said their participation in out-of-school activities was

weak, because of transport challenges and limited variety. In contrast, children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities do have good support from the local authority in accessing these activities, through provision delivered in partnership, for example with Barnados.

There is a higher proportion of children and young people in the authority identified with special educational needs than nationally and a higher proportion are taught in mainstream settings. This is because some children nominally in the special schools are actually taught in mainstream settings by special school staff. There is also good outreach support for mainstream schools from specialist staff.

Area(s) for development

- Monitor Key Stage 1 standards to ensure the effectiveness of guided writing programmes.
- Increase attendance by reducing unauthorised secondary school absence.

Making a positive contribution

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate.

The Tellus2 survey indicated that children and young people's views about their opportunity to contribute to their schools and communities, and about the extent to which they feel listened to, are consistent with those nationally. However, substantially smaller than usual proportions of children and young people participated in democratic school council elections.

Plans for improving coordination and provision of earlier intervention and preventative services for children and young people are progressing well through the development of a comprehensive family support strategy. Although the strategy is yet to be finalised and fully implemented, it builds on overall good existing child care provision and children's centres, and on well-established joint working arrangements between statutory and voluntary sectors. A wide stakeholder consultation about the plan has included children and young people, and their parents and carers. The council is aware of who and where its groups of vulnerable children and young people are and is targeting provision appropriately.

The council has some good consultation processes for children and young people including the Youth Council, school councils, and the recently established Shadow Children and Young People Partnership Board. Representation on the Youth Council and the Shadow Board appropriately reflects the local community and specific groups of children and young people, including those who are looked after and children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Young people were directly involved in the development of services to increase leisure opportunities, particularly for those hard-to-reach, such as those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The proportion of

young people aged 13–19 in contact with Youth Services increased from 11.5% to 15.5% but remains well below the national target of 25%. The council's Teenage Lifestyle Survey conducted in 2006 revealed that 12% of children and young people undertake voluntary work. Opportunities are wide-ranging and include a mentoring scheme funded through the Children Fund.

Services to reduce anti-social behaviour are effectively linked to the family support strategy and well coordinated through the well-regarded 'Prevent and Deter' strategy. The joint youth offending service covering Herefordshire and Worcestershire is an improving service. However, it has yet to effectively address the numbers of first-time entrants into the youth justice system, up by 15.7% to 358 which is well above statistical neighbours, and the rate of recidivism, currently at 54.5% compared to 48.7% for statistical neighbours. During 2006–07 performance fell against both of these aspects. More recently, the number of first-time entrants has fallen significantly and the rate of recidivism has shown an upward trend. The proportion of young people aged 16 and above known to the youth offending service and who are in education, employment and training is lower than the national average. The council and its partners have strengthened provision through appointment of education, employment and training support workers but these are yet to make an impact.

Children and young people who are looked after and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have specific consultation and review processes which are well used. Reviews of looked after children are timely and the participation of children and young people is high.

Area(s) for development

- Complete and implement the family support strategy.
- Reduce re-offending of young people.
- Increase the proportion of young offenders in education, employment and training.

Achieving economic well-being

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate, with several good features.

The outcomes for young people in terms of basic qualifications and training are good, given the high proportion of learners gaining qualifications at Level 2 or Level 3. The local authority has successfully reduced the numbers of 16 to 18 years olds not in education, employment or training, to below the national average (5.5% in 2006). An even lower proportion of looked after children are not in education, employment or training. Up to 90% of learners with learning difficulties and/or

disabilities have transition plans. Concerns remain that too many young people are taking up readily available local low-wage employment that offers no training.

Standards for A-levels are just above national averages, both per student and per qualification, across all further education settings. In schools with sixth forms, A-level standards are rising quickly and are now broadly similar to the national figures. Student success rates within the College of Technology have increased and are approaching the national average. Overall, outcomes for 16–19 year old learners are satisfactory, and good for vulnerable young people. All young care leavers are in suitable accommodation. The proportion of young apprentices who complete their training is much higher than the national value. The number of young apprenticeship placements has risen rapidly.

Previous progress towards developing an area-wide programme for 14–19 learning had been slow. Some collaborative work between schools is taking place to provide a wider range of vocational opportunities but the numbers involved have been relatively low. There are signs of better progress now, as the original strategy group has recently become a formal delivery board, with a full-time lead officer and a seconded secondary headteacher with considerable experience in developing vocational pathways in school. The local authority was unsuccessful in its bid to develop diplomas, and is now not expecting to start offering these qualifications until 2009.

Area(s) for development

- Deliver the revised strategy for a coherent area-wide 14–19 curriculum that provides access to a wider range of vocational courses.

Capacity to improve, including the management of children's services

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The capacity to improve, including the management of children's services is adequate, with some good features.

There are good partnerships between agencies to improve health and welfare for children and young people. The improvement in educational outcomes is thanks to good leadership and management of school improvement services and effective participation by schools. Outcomes for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and those looked after, are good. The recently appointed director of children's services has quickly analysed the strengths and weaknesses of service provision, and begun to drive through improvements in strategy and performance management. Her vision for inclusive and collaborative working with service providers is already evident in better consultation and wider ownership of the key challenge facing the authority as a consequence of falling numbers of pupils in schools. Better systems for analysing data are being rolled out,

for example in special educational needs support, with a realistic understanding of what remains to be done in terms of information and communication technology systems.

But in children's social care, some outcomes remain at lower than expected levels. The Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Board has still to appoint an independent chair although this has now been authorised and funded. It has also slipped against its own targets for completing work, for example in the auditing of compliance with safe recruitment practices across all agencies. Previous limitations in area-wide 14–19 development still limit vocational and educational opportunities for all. Appropriate steps to strengthen performance management have been taken but as yet are not embedded across all service areas.

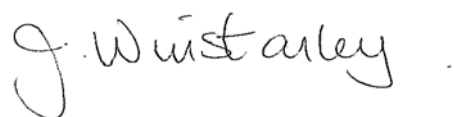
Despite these remaining areas for development, there is a sense of common purpose amongst service managers. Falling rolls will produce a downward pressure on resources for children's services, and the service leadership is consulting with its providers on strategies to manage this change. At the same time, the post-retirement aged population is rising, further increasing the challenge to ensure a sufficient proportion of local authority resources are allocated to children's services. These demographic pressures are occurring just as the council establishes a Public Services Trust to combine health and children's services functions.

Area(s) for development

- Improve performance management across front-line services.
- Strengthen the capacity for children's services to influence local priorities by ensuring children's services targets are integral to wider local authority plans.

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 and 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