

26 November 2007

Mr Gerald Meehan  
Strategic Director for Children and Young People  
Halton Borough Council  
Municipal Building  
Kingsway, Widnes  
Cheshire WA8 7QF

Dear Mr Meehan

## **2007 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN HALTON BOROUGH 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 (CYPP) 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 3**

Halton Borough Council delivers good services for children and young people. It is responsive to external advice and scrutiny, has a clear focus on outcomes for children and young people and is striving to improve services year on year. In all but one respect, a good or better contribution is made by services towards improving outcomes. Together, children's services are making a number of significant contributions to improving the achievement and well-being of children and young people within an area that faces significant social and economic challenges. The council successfully ensures that services and departments work well together and have ambitious plans for the future. The council has correctly identified that its contribution to young people's economic well-being is adequate and has initiated robust action to tackle this issue.

### **Being healthy**

**Grade 3**

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. The previous APA identified one area for improvement. This was to evaluate the impact of the comprehensive Child and Mental Health Service

(CAMHS). Good progress has been made in this regard and work continues. The council has invested substantial funding to improve CAMHS services. Access to full provision for 16 and 17 year olds is well advanced and waiting times for CAMHS are good overall. For example, response times for new non-specialist cases and new specialist cases below 26 weeks are good. However, responses to new non-specialist cases under four weeks are not always met. Partnership working between agencies for young people with complex/persistent mental health needs and the commissioning of CAMHS in the local area for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are good. The council is confident it can deliver on the target for a fully integrated service by April 2008 to ensure that the needs of all children and young people in the local area are met.

Using data from the calendar year 2005 the teenage conception rate has risen to 56 per 1,000, which is in line with statistical neighbours. To tackle this issue, the authority acted swiftly by introducing a range of sex and relationship programmes in secondary schools and sexual health services in hotspot wards. Similar action was taken to decrease the high numbers of children and young people who are admitted to hospital as a result of failing to take medication for respiratory conditions. Recent data suggest these actions are having a positive impact.

The local authority supports the registration of early years provision very well and outcomes for under eights are good. Progress on meeting targets for the Healthy School Standard is very good; pupils enjoy two or more hours of sport and physical activities weekly. Halton is a top 10 performer in this area. Schools continue to make a good contribution to promoting healthy lifestyles, with outcomes for the majority of pupils good or better. Healthy lifestyles are being promoted very well. For example, an Advanced Paediatric nurse practitioner is holding a daily drop-in session at a high school to promote this aspect. The local authority's performance on oral health is weaker than nationally and remains an area for development.

There is effective joint commissioning and multi-disciplinary work to support children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. For example, the Shaping of Services project has provided extensive support for 18 families of children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and challenging behaviour. Coherent partnership arrangements with statutory and voluntary services are making a real difference for some of the more vulnerable children and young people. For example, there have been improved health outcomes for looked after children and young people with an increase to 96% for those receiving an annual health assessment during the previous 12 months.

### **Areas for development**

- Improve waiting times for CAMHS non-specialist cases.
- Accelerate plans to improve oral health.

## Staying safe

## Grade 4

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is outstanding. The 2006 APA identified no areas for improvement in this service. Over the last 12 months, the council and its partners have successfully sustained an outstanding level of service for children and young people. Services are demonstrably improving outcomes for the most vulnerable young people, the highly effective multi-agency safeguarding work on neglect, for example. Aspects of safety are promoted very well by the council and its partners, and initiatives have had a positive impact. As a result of a focus on road safety in the borough, the number of children and young people aged 0–15 killed or seriously injured in road traffic accidents has reduced sharply at a rate significantly better than the national average.

Responses from a recent survey reveal that the majority of children and young people feel safe living in Halton. Outcomes of school inspections indicate that learners adopt safe practices very well. Schools achieve significantly more outstanding judgements for this aspect than in similar areas. Anti-bullying guidance is in place in all but five schools and looked after children and young people of secondary school age are supported effectively through the use of Think Smart bullying cards.

The council identifies weaknesses and deals with them quickly and efficiently. The council has made some significant improvements by resolving issues in the preparation of early years applicants for registration, adoption service inspections, and by reducing the number of vacancies for full-time social workers.

The implementation of the Common Assessment Framework was completed ahead of target with 385 assessments initiated to date. Services use the Common Assessment Framework very well to offer high impact, sharply focused early intervention and sustained performance. For example, the number of core assessments per 10,000 population has risen sharply from 63.3% to 103.2% to provide a better quality of planning and delivery of service for children and families. The number of referrals has reduced to 358 compared to 578 in similar authorities and 493 nationally. Likewise, the number of repeat referrals at 11.9% is well below similar councils at 23.3% and 22.7 % nationally. The Local Safeguarding Board is beginning to broaden its remit to encompass a wider safeguarding role and has developed its focus on maintaining high levels of safeguarding practice. All child protection cases are allocated to a social worker and are particularly well managed. Parents of children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities routinely attend child protection case conferences.

Transitional planning to support the move of 14 year olds with learning difficulties and/or disabilities from children's services to adult services is good. Multi-agency work to protect children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is a strong feature. For example, a recently introduced multi-agency neglect protocol has led to earlier intervention resulting in a reduction in the number of referrals by 16.8%.

The council's performance on improving outcomes for looked after children and young people is impressive. For example, all statutory reviews and visits are carried out on time. Short-term and long-term stability of placement are very good, with the numbers of children and young people placed in residential accommodation low. This is making a discernible difference for children and young people.

## **Enjoying and achieving**

## **Grade 3**

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. The previous APA also judged this aspect as good and recommended improvement in the number of exclusions and unauthorised absence in secondary schools, and in achievement in Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 4. The authority has made good progress in nearly all of these areas.

Children are getting a good start to their education. An above average proportion of nursery settings are judged to be good or better in Ofsted inspections. Training and support remain strong and the number of children who achieve the early learning goals by the end of the Foundation Stage is similar to the national picture. Intensive challenge and support has resulted in an improvement from 2005 in standards at Key Stage 1 in reading and mathematics. Standards in writing have been maintained. The planned activities to improve teachers' skills and the introduction of different approaches to learning appear to be having a positive impact on outcomes at Key Stage 1, which now compare very positively with those in similar councils. Standards in mathematics and science have improved at Key Stage 2, and improved rapidly at Key Stage 3, resulting in standards at both key stages that are in line with the national average. Standards in English remain below the national average, though at Key Stage 3 they are in line with similar councils. Robust strategies to target performance in English at each key stage, with particular reference to the achievement of boys, are beginning to prove effective. Early indications from the unvalidated 2007 test results show marked improvement most especially at Key Stage 2. From Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 2 children and young people make the same amount of progress as those elsewhere.

Children and young people make very good progress between Key Stages 2 and 4. GCSE results continue to improve at a faster pace than nationally, with 54.23% achieving five or more A\* to C grades and almost all young people (97.49%) leaving school with at least one qualification. However, once English and mathematics results are taken into account the results are less impressive and are 3.77% below those found in similar areas. The authority took action by implementing challenge, support and intervention strategies in target areas. Examination results for 2007 show some improvements.

Looked after children and young people attend school regularly and achieve well. Although small numbers of children and young people affect the reliability of these results, in 2005/06, 50% of all looked after children and young people left school with one A\* to G GCSE and 20% gained five grade A\* to C at GCSE. These figures compare favourably with similar areas.

Most children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, make at least satisfactory and sometimes better progress than their peers. The council has progressed work on early intervention, capacity building in mainstream schools and earlier release of resources, resulting in a reduction in the number of children and young people receiving a new statement. Between April 2006 and March 2007, no school was placed into an Ofsted category of concern. One school, given a notice to improve in March 2006, received comprehensive support from the authority and is now judged to be satisfactory.

Results of a recent survey of the views of local children and young people showed that on the whole they enjoy school and are proud of their achievements. This view is supported by school inspections where almost all children and young people are judged to enjoy school. Their attitudes and behaviour in schools is mostly good or better. Fewer children and young people are excluded from schools. Permanent exclusion in secondary schools has dropped from 2005 by 0.12%. Provision for these children and young people is strong, with 94% receiving 20 hours or more of tuition per week as compared to 86.5% in similar councils.

School attendance is broadly in line with national averages and similar authorities, with a significant improvement in absence rates over the last three years. To further improve attendance and raise standards, particularly for looked after children and young people, the authority is monitoring absence at or above 20% for all children across the borough. Members of the school health team visit children and young people absent for medical reasons to offer support in managing the illness.

### **Areas for development**

- Increase the proportion of pupils gaining five or more GCSEs grade A\* to C, including English and mathematics.
- Improve the rate of progress pupils make between Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2.

## **Making a positive contribution**

**Grade 4**

### **Summary of strengths and areas for development**

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is outstanding. The previous APA judged this aspect as good and identified one area for development. This was to increase the effectiveness of measures to reduce the rate of reprimands, final warnings and convictions amongst looked after children in Halton's care. Performance in this area has improved significantly over the last 12 months. The rate of reprimands, warnings and convictions is now slightly better than in similar authorities and nationally. Targeted work to reduce the numbers of looked after children and young people offending is being effectively delivered through improved partnership working.

There are some excellent initiatives in place to help divert children and young people away from anti-social behaviour. Very good use is made of local intelligence to target improvement and match service to need. For example, 185 young people living in wards that have been designated as nuisance activity hot spots were engaged by the youth and fire service. This led to a reduction in nuisance activity and 43 of these young people achieved a recorded outcome and 16 achieved nationally accredited awards. The performance of the council's services on youth offending is good overall. For example, the rate of re-offending is reducing and numbers involved are lower than similar areas and nationally. The number of first time entrants is higher than similar areas but through targeted work by police and other partners the figure is reducing year on year. Restorative conferences with the police are a strong feature.

High proportions of young people engage in a wide range of activities and achieve accredited outcomes. The service promotes volunteering opportunities very well. For example, the number of young people, including those with a learning difficulty and/or disability, who embarked this year on the Duke of Edinburgh Award, is high and the number of young people who received citizenship awards is good and increasing.

Initiatives to promote the involvement of looked after children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are good. Their views increasingly inform strategic planning and influence positively the range of provision available. For example, representations have been made by looked after children and young people in 65 separate consultations. The number of looked after children and young people who attend and make representations at their statutory review is very good. Children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are involved in a disabled young people's forum and participate in Halton's Youth Parliament. This enables them to make their views known on some important issues.

The contribution made by children and young people to review the CYPP is thorough, leading to the identification of priorities. There are comprehensive mechanisms to enable young people to have their voices heard and they are involved routinely in the evaluation of council services; through the UK Youth Parliament, the Youth Cabinet and the Youth Bank, for example.

The positive contribution that pupils make in school is strong. In Ofsted inspections, 91% of primary and 100% of secondary schools were judged to be good or better. Very good progress has been made against targets set out in the CYPP. For example, more young carers were identified and given social and emotional support, as a result of the council's provision for vulnerable people. The council recognises that the support given by adoption services to birth parents and families needs to improve.

### **Area for development**

- Improve the support given by adoption services to birth parents and families.



## Achieving economic well-being

## Grade 2

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate. Despite taking action in this area, the authority has correctly judged that progress in this aspect of its work is not as good as in last year's APA. Officers recognise that there is more work to be done to engage young people in education, employment or training and raise outcomes in post-16 attainment and progress; areas identified for improvement last year.

There has been an increase of 84 child care places and good progress on establishing children's centres. Halton is a successful parent/carer provider and the Children's Information Service has promoted the availability and affordability benefits of working tax and child tax credits. As a result, parents in Halton have the opportunity to return to employment.

Young people are satisfactorily prepared for their working life. Young people choosing to continue in education, training or employment start well, with 89% continuing in learning. Partnership working with Connexions has successfully identified young people whose current activity was previously not known. The number of young people aged 19 who are not in education, employment or training is 12.1% and has increased over the last two years. The number of young people aged 16-18 who are not in education, employment or training, at 11.8%, is in line with similar councils but above the national average, with a higher percentage in Runcorn than Widnes. The ambitious reduction of these numbers to 6.8% by 2010 has been identified as one of the authority's main priorities. Within this priority the needs of other vulnerable groups such as care leavers, teenage parents and young offenders are included.

School inspections between 1 April 2006 and 31 March 2007 reveal that almost 80% of schools are good or better at enabling children and young people to achieve economic well-being. Effective action has been taken to improve college provision within the Borough. The authority amalgamated sixth form and further education colleges to form a new college with the aim of raising standards and choice for young people. The council's 14-19 strategy is based on good collaboration and a clear focus on partnership. There is a curriculum options-and-pathways booklet and information is provided to pupils in Years 9 and 11. Children and young people receive good advice and guidance about career development. Arrangements for young people to study courses in other schools and discussions with providers regarding the possibility of a common 14-19 curriculum are at an early stage. The percentages of young people gaining Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications by age 19 are broadly in line with similar councils, although numbers reaching Level 3 fell slightly in 2006. Opportunities for vocational education have resulted in a significant rise in the number of young people taking apprenticeships, with 280 involved in 2006 compared to 129 in 2004.

Looked after children and young people receive stable placements and achieve well. Joint working with the council and engagement with looked after children and young people are positive. Partnership working with Connexions helps ensure continuity of targeted and personalised support for care leavers. Some 98% of care leavers have a pathway plan by the age of 16. However, as they grow older, the numbers of care leavers engaged in education, employment or training are low. The authority has implemented plans to create opportunities to access jobs with the council, and financial support to undertake modern apprenticeships. Although there has been a reduction in the percentage of care leavers in temporary accommodation to 30%, the authority plan to reduce the number of care leavers living in temporary accommodation to 15% by 2009.

### **Areas for development**

- Reduce the proportion of young people not engaged in education, training or employment.
- Increase the numbers of young people gaining Level 2+ qualifications.

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

**Grade 3**

The council has good capacity to improve its services for children and young people. Its management arrangements are robust and Halton shows a strong commitment to improving the outcomes for children and young people. There is good senior leadership and good corporate support for improving children's services provision further. The Director of Children and Young People's Services took up post in April 2007 and there has been significant change in senior leadership due to restructuring. Two new operational directors are due to take up post at the start of October 2007. The impact of this reorganisation has yet to be realised. The review of the comprehensive and detailed 2006 CYPP showed that good progress is being made on most fronts. The proportion of young people gaining GCSEs including English and mathematics has improved. However, the number of young people not in education, employment or training has increased. The council recognise that the impact of services on the economic well-being of young people has slipped from 2006.

Scrutiny arrangements ensure that lead and cabinet members receive detailed and regular information. This close monitoring enables swift action to be taken. For example, early action was implemented to improve attendance and reduce the offending of looked after children and young people.

Partnership working is strong with high levels of integration. For example, agreement has been secured for the secondment of staff from the Primary Care Trust as a key step in the progression towards children's trust arrangements. Some progress has been made on preventative strategies and the council have implemented plans to develop this aspect.



There is a multi-agency children and young people's commissioning partnership which has agreed a model of integrated service delivery, based on an audit of local need. There is evidence of effective commissioning, for example with the Primary Care Trust and Sure Start. Wider commissioning is exemplified in the joint emergency team established with St Helen's Council.

The council has good systems of financial control and maintains its expenditure within available resources. It has effective financial and reporting arrangements and provides value for money. Higher spending is matched with the council's priorities and this investment is resulting in improved services in some areas. Work to identify cost savings, without detracting from service quality while maintaining high levels of activity, has begun. The re-designation of four Halton special schools has been completed and work has started to tackle the high number of surplus places in the secondary sector. Savings made through successful and effective strategies to support young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have been invested back into schools.

There is an integrated approach to performance management resulting in a number of local indicators for measuring outcomes for particular groups of vulnerable children and young people. The council plan to improve information sharing arrangements to ensure required data are available.

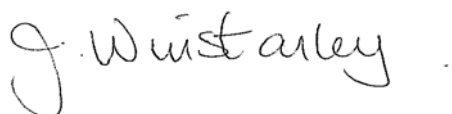
Consultation, not least with children, young people and families, has continued to develop.

### **Area for development**

- Raise educational and training outcomes for those aged 16 and over.

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 dark ink, reading "J. Winstanley".

Juliet Winstanley  
Divisional Manager  
Local Services Inspection