

21 December 2007

Ms Jo Davidson
Group Director of Children and Young People's Services
Gloucestershire County Council
Shire Hall
Westgate Street
Gloucester
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Dear Ms Davidson

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

This letter summarises the findings of the 2007 annual performance assessment for your local authority, some aspects of which were conducted at the same time as the analysis stage of the joint area review. The 2006 annual performance assessment informed the scoping of the joint area review at the planning stage and the initial findings of the 2007 annual performance assessment were taken into account by the review team at the end of the analysis stage. The outcomes of the joint area review were then considered alongside a review of recent data in arriving at the final annual performance assessment judgements for 2007. As a result, many of the areas for development highlighted in this letter align with the recommendations in the joint area review report and should be similarly aligned in any future action plan produced by the council and its partners. The judgements in the letter also draw on your comprehensive self-assessment and review of the Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP) and the evidence and briefings provided by Ofsted and other inspectorates. We are grateful for the information you provided to support this and for the time given by you and your colleagues to the assessment process.

Overall effectiveness of children's services

Grade 3

Gloucestershire generally delivers services for children and young people at a good level, with many good and some outstanding features in most of the five main areas of assessment.

The achievement and well-being of children and young people are well above average and the council works hard to narrow the gap between the commendable outcomes for the majority and the small number who are more vulnerable. Senior officers, quite rightly, recognise there is still some way to go; collectively they ensure that improvement continues at a swift pace. A thoughtful and intelligent approach has improved both integration and consistency in provision, particularly for more vulnerable groups, such as looked after children and young people.

The inclusive CYPP and the council's assessment of progress demonstrate good capacity for further improvement. Areas of need have been carefully identified and addressed precisely. There is evidence of progress in many outcomes over the last year and all of the issues identified for improvement in the 2006 annual performance assessment have been tackled or are still being addressed successfully. Children and young people are consulted in a range of innovative ways. Their views are valued, taken seriously and influence change. Collaboration with most external partners is good.

Being healthy

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The council continues to make a good contribution to the promotion of healthy lifestyles for children and young people.

General practitioners provide good child health surveillance services. At birth, all children receive a comprehensive health assessment and new parents are provided with helpful information and advice on health promotion. Good partnership working is effectively ensuring that the rate of teenage pregnancies continues to reduce, with the figure now being the lowest in the Southwest. Excellent guidance on sexual health, contraception, smoking cessation and treatment for substance misuse is available in a range of settings. Good progress has been made with young people and the drugs agenda, despite the substance misuse service being under pressure. Transitional management arrangements are being provided by the council to address these challenges and a comprehensive draft commissioning strategy is in place.

The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) has faced difficulties due to long waiting lists; exacerbated by inappropriate referrals for specialist services. The introduction of the 'choice and partnership approach' is making a successful start. The number of children and young people waiting for assessment by specialist CAMHS has been significantly reduced, although waiting times for provision of service are unavailable.

A radical approach to mental health issues is being adopted through the development of an innovative emotional health and well-being strategy. This is comprehensive and aims to improve intervention as early as possible with speedy access to specialist services. The strategy is not yet fully implemented but there are early signs that this integrated approach is strengthening partnership working and facilitating earlier responses.

Arrangements for meeting the health needs of looked after children and young people are very good. An independent audit of health provision is used effectively to improve standards and specific contracts are being developed with general practitioners and dentists. The percentage of looked after children and young people who have received annual health and dental checks within timescales has increased

year on year and, at 83%, is very good and in line with similar councils and the national average. Good work is taking place to encourage young people to attend health and well-being consultations.

Concerns in the 2006 annual performance assessment about waiting times for services for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are being tackled through significant investment in social care and health services. The numbers on social care waiting lists are reducing but, despite investment, referrals for occupational therapy assessments have increased, with no significant reduction in waiting times, although waiting times for provision of equipment have shown some improvement. A number of children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and their families are benefiting from the implementation of the common assessment framework. This is leading to effective earlier intervention and the introduction of packages of care more closely linked to assessed need. The direct payments scheme has been outsourced successfully and both the take up and confidence in this service is increasing.

A significant number of schools have been awarded Healthy School status. The local authority is the fourth highest in this nationally which is an outstanding achievement. Targets for engaging pupils in physical activity continue to be exceeded. Schools play an important part in promoting healthy lifestyles and there is good access to sporting and recreational activities for most children and young people. Within early years settings there is good provision to improve health standards for children. Integrated working in the successful children's centres is developing exceptionally well.

Areas for development

- Ensure staffing levels in services for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are sufficient to meet identified need
- Ensure that a comprehensive CAMHS is resourced such that there is sufficient capacity to meet demand at all levels and that groups identified as a priority are able to get easy access to the service.

Staying safe

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people is adequate.

Most children feel safe at school. Good efforts are being made to respond to bullying and in a council online survey of nearly 13,000 children and young people three quarters of pupils thought that schools handled incidents of bullying well. However, the same survey identified that a significant proportion of children and young people had witnessed or been the victim of domestic abuse. The council and its partners have responded by making domestic violence a priority in the CYPP.

Although there has been a recent slight rise in numbers of children and young people whose names are placed on the Child Protection Register, overall numbers remain lower than in similar councils. The joint area review found that thresholds for access to children's social care services and for core child protection services are high, leading to risk that children and young people with high level need who do not meet these thresholds do not receive appropriate services. The authority considers that the slight rise in numbers is as a result of increased notification of domestic abuse, greater use of the strategy discussions and an improved awareness of child protection issues, but also acknowledges that child protection thresholds are inconsistently applied across the county. The joint area review also found that decision-making at the point of referral is insufficiently robust, with poor management oversight and auditing of decisions and processes, and that the timeliness of allocation of cases for core assessments is inappropriately dependent on capacity within area social care teams, leading to unacceptable delays in service provision in some areas.

Safeguarding arrangements for children and young people whose names are placed on the Child Protection Register are good. All children and young people are allocated qualified social workers and all cases are reviewed within prescribed timescales. The Gloucestershire Safeguarding Children Board monitors performance well and has evaluated information and data in order to assess the consistency of response between differing geographical areas. It is using this information to improve equity of access to child protection services. In the past year lessons learned from three serious case reviews have been used very effectively to disseminate good practice, by arranging road shows attended by a large number of staff. Feedback from staff and managers is that these have been a valuable opportunity to improve practice.

Performance data show that numbers of initial and core assessments completed within required timescales are improving strongly, being now above similar councils and national averages. However, social care services have changed the method of counting completed assessments. Assessments which are not completed, but are subject to delay, are inappropriately counted as completed once the time limit for completion is reached, and a 'new' assessment is begun when work resumes. Performance indicator data on completed assessments is, as a result, an inadequate measure of timeliness and quality of services to children and young people.

Good progress is being made in implementing the common assessment framework within required timescales and the process is being used in nearly half of all schools. A good number of children and young people, approximately 1,500, have been assessed and their needs addressed by packages of care which match assessed need. These improvements are being supported through Budget Holding Lead Professional pilots. Initial evaluation of these pilots indicates that improved and innovative packages of services are being provided to children and young people. Feedback from families and other agencies is very positive.

The number of looked after children and young people remains consistently low, reflecting both good gate-keeping processes for looked after services and active engagement to ensure that, where possible, children and young people are able to return home quickly. The rate of children and young people being adopted is very good. A higher number of children and young people are placed in kinship care than those in comparator councils, and they are receiving good specialist support. Placement stability for looked after children and young people is good, with effective support arrangements, including the provision of a multi-agency intervention team. Their achievement is monitored carefully by the Looked After Children Strategy Group.

Residential care home inspection reports identify poor management, unsatisfactory fabric of buildings and high staff vacancy and sickness levels in the council's five children's homes, leading to unacceptably low quality of care for the residents. Robust action is now being taken to address these issues through the children's home improvement plan.

Significant numbers of children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities do not have a transition plan. Many of these children and young people have a range of different plans which are not always coordinated effectively. The local authority is taking positive steps to develop transitions pathways and the production of a single multi-agency plan for each child.

Areas for development

- Ensure full implementation of the Children's Homes Improvement Programme.
- Ensure that performance data accurately reflect action taken.
- Ensure that child protection thresholds for access to core child protection services are consistently applied across the county.
- Ensure that all children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have transition plans.

Enjoying and achieving

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, with several outstanding features.

Standards of attainment are consistently above the national average in primary and secondary schools and have been since 2002. Most children and young people make good or better progress from their starting points and achieve well. Results in the Tellus2 survey and school surveys carried out with children and young people in the authority, show that on the whole they enjoy school and try to do their best. These results are strongly supported by school inspection outcomes where pupils' attitudes

and behaviour are judged mostly to be good or better. The progress of looked after children and young people continues to improve due to the high priority the council gives to ensuring effective multi-agency work.

Attendance in primary and secondary schools is good; this also confirms positive attitudes to education. Since the 2006 annual performance assessment, exclusions have decreased. Fixed term exclusions have increased although they still remain below the national average. Improving attendance and reducing exclusions further continues to be a high priority for the council, particularly for children and young people in special schools. A range of strategies to improve the coordination of services now help children and young people to avoid exclusion, particularly those from vulnerable groups and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Children are getting a good start to their education and parents and carers receive good or better support in helping their children to enjoy and achieve. The number of children having access to early education and provision has increased and is good. A high proportion of services, including the children's centres, are judged to be good or outstanding in Ofsted inspections. In the foundation stage, attainment is well above the national average for the two main areas of learning: personal social and emotional development; and communication, language and literacy.

In Key Stage 1, standards in reading, writing and mathematics are above the national average, although there was a slight dip in 2006 in the number of pupils achieving Level 2+ and above. This was in line with the national trend and the local authority remains in the top twenty nationally. Provisional results for 2007 show that it has maintained or improved its ranking against its 2006 statistical neighbours, although it does not perform quite as well in writing at the higher levels. Good plans are in place to tackle this, including a review of moderation and standardisation of tests and by making this a priority in the Local Agreement.

In Key Stage 2, standards continue to be well above the national average. The authority is in the top 20 nationally for all subjects and is fourth in science. This is an outstanding achievement. Since the previous annual performance assessment in 2006, the focus on raising attainment in mathematics and boys' writing resulted in pleasing improvements. Provisional results for 2007 indicate that standards in all subjects continue to improve as do the value-added scores for looked after children.

Standards continue to be above the national average in Key Stage 3 and effective intervention has increased the number of pupils achieving at the higher levels. At Key Stage 4 this positive picture continues and results show gains in the number of pupils achieving five A* to C grades including English and mathematics.

The proportion of looked after children and young people achieving five A* to C grades is at its highest level in four years and above the national average. That said, the local authority is fully aware that there is still some way to go to close the gap between its performance and that of the highest achieving authorities. Targets set are challenging and the appointment of a 'virtual' headteacher for looked after

children and young people is an excellent initiative. The educational attainment of children and young people from minority ethnic groups is more variable, particularly the performance of Black Caribbean, and Traveller students in secondary schools. However, the local authority has several innovative projects to support these groups and other under achieving children and young people, including being a part of the Making Good Progress national pilot project. The increase in the numbers of White Eastern European young people has risen sharply since 2004. Good support is provided for new arrivals and their progress is subject to careful scrutiny. The completion of statements for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities within the timescales set is a concern and requires swift improvement. Steps are being taken to resolve this by both the local authority and the health providers and early indications are good. Most Ofsted inspections judge the progress of children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to be good.

The proportion of schools that provide a good or better quality of education is higher than in similar local authorities and those nationally. A high number of secondary schools continue to receive outstanding inspection judgements and more primary schools are now also placed in this category. The picture for special schools is more variable and requires careful monitoring.

Very few schools are in Ofsted categories of concern because of swift intervention, intensive support and bespoke training programmes. The local authority has strengthened its existing good procedures to identify and challenge relatively underperforming schools through the introduction of school data profiles, improving the accountability of governors and developing its commissioning role. Most schools on intervention programmes are making good progress. School improvement services continue to be at least good or better. They are targeting their efforts imaginatively and in an integrated way to those schools at risk of underachieving. The local authority is using its statutory powers of intervention effectively.

Areas for development

- Reduce further the percentage of exclusions, particularly in special schools, and ensure services provided for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are timely and of a consistent high quality
- Further close the educational gap between children and young people from vulnerable groups and their high achieving peers

Making a positive contribution

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The council is making a good contribution in this area.

The local authority is strongly committed to involving children and young people and its participation strategy is comprehensive. Children and young people in Gloucestershire are given excellent opportunities to express their views and contribute to the design, delivery and improvement of services.

Nearly 13,000 children and young people completed a health and lifestyle survey; outcomes were well used to inform the CYPP and the local area agreement. Young people are involved imaginatively in undertaking peer inspections of the youth service and in commissioning with the Connexions service; this is good practice. The local authority provides diligent feedback to children and young people on the value of their contributions and the regular publication of 'You Said – We Did' keeps looked after children and young people very well informed about the local authority's responsiveness.

A key worker encourages participation specifically by looked after children and young people; this too is evidence of good practice. Levels of participation in statutory reviews are good and improving and are enhanced by the work of the independent reviewing officer team. The efficient 'arms length' advocacy service is successfully enabling young people to participate in decisions about their care.

The Youth Offending Service was the lowest performing in the region but it has made significant progress against key indicators in the last year. A robust performance improvement plan is in place. However, the service continues to face a significant increase in demand due to the very high rate of offences brought to justice and the high number of court appearances and custodial sentences. The rate of re-offending is in line with statistical neighbours and shows that over a twelve-month follow-up period offending levels are lower for the first tier, community-penalty and custody cases.

A multi-agency policy to reduce offending by looked after children and young people, is being implemented in three phases, in children's homes, foster care and independent provision. Quarterly monitoring reports indicate that the policy is starting to bring about improvements, particularly in children's homes.

The council takes its corporate parenting responsibilities seriously and there are good and regular opportunities for looked after children and young people to voice their views to elected members and senior officers.

Area for development

- Ensure continued swift improvements in the Youth Offending Service to reduce the number of first-time entrants into the youth justice system and the number of court appearances and custodial sentences.

Achieving economic well-being

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 and some aspects are outstanding.

The overall effectiveness of 16–19 education in most secondary and special schools, based on recent inspections, is good or better. The percentage of young people gaining Level 2 and 3 qualifications by the age of 19 increased in 2006 and continues to be above the national average. The percentage of young people entered for and gaining qualifications in academic and vocational examinations is well above the national average. The NVQ success rate for all work-based learners also increased and is above the national average. The percentage of young people in employment, education and training is high: the local authority is ranked sixth nationally. The numbers of young people not in employment, education and training continues to decrease and provisional data for July 2007 shows the local authority figures to be the lowest in the country.

The percentage of looked after children and young people in employment, education and training rose sharply between 2006 and 2007; it is very good compared to the national average. The council acknowledges that more needs to be done to develop appropriate vocational pathways and effective transition to post-16 education for all vulnerable groups including those young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. A clear priority for the local authority is to work with partner organisations, such as Connexions, to use the available data related to these groups to improve provision. It has good, integrated plans to tackle this.

The local authority continues to ensure that 14–19 education and training is planned and delivered in a coordinated way, working closely with all the providers. The launch of the online prospectus was successful and early indications are that the prospectus is effective in raising awareness among young people, their parents and carers. There is an increased number of vocational courses on offer, resulting in higher retention rates of 17-year-olds. That said, access and entitlement for all young people across the county requires careful monitoring to ensure barriers are overcome. In particular, these are: motivating the minority of young people who are not in employment, education and training, especially those from vulnerable groups; engaging more employers in work-based learning and tackling transport issues. This is particularly pertinent in some rural areas. Nonetheless, there are good examples where partnerships are embracing these challenges in innovative and creative ways.

The local authority continues to work effectively with the Learning and Skills Council and local partnerships have been successful in gaining accreditation to deliver four of the new 14–19 diplomas. Good joint appointments have been made to promote employer engagement and to coordinate county policies on 14-19 reform.

Area for development

- Further develop vocational pathways and transition plans for vulnerable groups including young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities

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

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The management of services for children and young people is good overall and it has a good capacity to improve. Leadership of Children's Services overall is good and, with cross-party support from elected members, works in innovative ways to ensure high quality services.

The council has stated its high ambitions clearly in the CYPP and its associated business plan. These comprehensive and accessible documents are subject to thorough self assessment and detailed evaluation. Gaps in service provision are identified clearly, showing a prompt response to emerging needs, especially by integrating service delivery or commissioning new services. Decision making is transparent and officers work effectively with most partners, securing value for money. For example, educational attainment remains consistently good or better despite the low funding levels of schools in the whole of the local authority. The council recognises there is more to do to align service priorities with resources across the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership and to ensure all the services provided for children and young people from vulnerable groups reach the high quality of the majority.

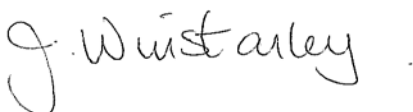
The council has a skilled workforce providing good leadership, challenge and support. It is not afraid to delay the appointment of key post holders to ensure the best people are recruited. A strong performance-management framework extends across all council services and is well linked to the CYPP. Senior leaders are aware of its strengths and areas for improvement.

Area for development

- Ensure all services provided for children and young people from vulnerable groups and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities reach the high quality of the majority.

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".

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager
Local Services Inspection