

17 December 2008

Mr Graham Tombs
Executive Director for Schools, Children and Families
Essex County Council
Schools, Children and Families Directorate
PO Box 11
County Hall
Chelmsford
CM1 1LX

Dear Mr Tombs

Annual performance assessment of services for children and young people in Essex 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	2
Being healthy	2
Staying safe	1
Enjoying and achieving	2
Making a positive contribution	3
Achieving economic well-being	2
Capacity to improve, including the management of services for children and young people	2

*Inspectors make judgements based on the following scale
4: outstanding/excellent; 3: good; 2: adequate; 1: inadequate*

Overall effectiveness of children's services

Grade 2

Essex County Council provides services that make an adequate contribution to outcomes for children and young people. It delivers services that overall meet the minimum requirements. The management of children's services is adequate, as is the capacity of the council to make further improvements. Making a positive contribution to the community is a strength and young people are significantly involved in decision making. Provision and outcomes for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are good.

There are inadequacies in safeguarding. The proportion of young people who continue learning beyond the school leaving age is high. Whilst there have been significant improvements, the proportion of teenage parents in employment, education or training is still too low. The attainment of looked after children is better than that of their counterparts in other councils and across the country.

Being healthy

Grade 2

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate. The council's analysis of its strengths and areas for development in this outcome area underestimate a number of important weaknesses and overestimate the areas where progress has been made. The table below sets out the evidence for the grade awarded.

Major strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There are good services to support children and young people involved with substance misuse, who are mentally unwell or who are offending. The infant mortality rate is lower than the average nationally. The timeliness of initial assessment for child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) is significantly better than the national average.
Important weaknesses and areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Waiting times for CAMHS follow-up treatment are too long. There are gaps in service for children with complex needs in the transition to adulthood. Whilst progress has been made, the percentage of schools achieving Healthy School status is still below the average for similar councils.

Staying safe

Grade 1

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is inadequate. The council's analysis of its strengths and areas for development in this outcome area underestimate a number of important weaknesses

and overvalue the areas where progress has been made. The table below sets out the evidence for the grade awarded.

Major strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The council has a good anti-bullying strategy and has taken effective action in this area. ▪ Planning and placement stability for looked after children have improved. ▪ All children on the Child Protection Register and those who are looked after have a qualified social worker.
Important weaknesses and areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The threshold for referral to children and young people's services is not understood and acted on consistently. This was also noted in the 2007 APA. ▪ Recruitment and vetting of staff working with children are not sufficiently robust. ▪ Insufficient priority is given to bringing about improvements by learning from complaints about service and serious case reviews. ▪ The target for reducing the number of young people who are victims of crime has not been met.

Enjoying and achieving

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"> ▪ Results at Key Stage 4, including the proportion gaining five or more GCSEs at A* to C, are above the national average. ▪ The proportion of schools judged good or outstanding in inspection reports is above average with fewer schools in an Ofsted category of concern, particularly in the secondary phase. ▪ Specifically targeted educational programmes are having a positive effect on engagement, attendance and exclusion for lower achievers and the most vulnerable pupils. ▪ The attainment of looked after children is above that of their counterparts nationally and in similar councils. ▪ The progress of children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is better than the average for similar councils.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- Outcomes in the Early Years and Foundation Stage are below the averages nationally and for similar councils.
- There are still too many schools below the GCSE floor target.
- Attendance in secondary schools is not improving fast enough and the rate of absence for looked after children is high.
- The proportion of fixed term exclusions in primary schools is higher than that in similar councils.
- There is a rising trend in the issuing of new statements against a falling trend nationally and in similar councils. Referrals to the special educational needs and Disability Rights Tribunal are twice the national average.

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

Major strengths

- Young people are closely involved in decision making. Their influence is reflected in such areas as joint strategic needs assessment and the good outcomes for disadvantaged young people involved in youth work.
- The proportion of looked after children in the criminal justice system is lower than average.
- There is a good level of participation by looked after children in their statutory reviews.
- The proportion of new offenders has fallen much more sharply than in similar councils or nationally.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- The percentage rate of re-offending has risen faster than in similar councils.
- The proportion of supervised juveniles in full time education is lower than the averages nationally or in 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. The council's analysis of its strengths and areas for development in this outcome area underestimates a number of important weaknesses and overvalues the areas where progress has been made. The table below sets out the evidence for the grade awarded.

Major strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The proportion of young people not in employment, education and training is falling faster than in similar councils and nationally. ▪ Youth work provision is good, with young people achieving well. ▪ The council has a clear 14–19 strategic plan. The curriculum is good and offers a wide range of vocational options. ▪ The proportion of young people gaining Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications is rising, with improved attainment at A and AS level. ▪ Support for care leavers is good and the proportion in employment, education and training continues to be very high. ▪ Outcomes in employment, education and training for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are good.
Important weaknesses and areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Participation in post-16 work-based learning has fallen over the last three years and remains below the national average. ▪ Whilst the percentage for teenage parents in education has nearly doubled, it is still below the averages nationally and for similar councils. ▪ Over a third of young offenders who are above school age are not in employment, education and training. ▪ Employers are not sufficiently engaged in the 14–19 strategy and not all head teachers are aware of 14–19 developments. ▪ The council does not routinely make use of data on ethnicity to inform 14–19 planning. ▪ The proportion of looked after children with a personal education plan is improving but still low.

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

Grade 2

The council's capacity to improve its services for children and young people is adequate, as is its management of these services. The council and its partners have strong ambitions, with vigorous leadership and commitment at senior level across agencies to deliver the CYPP. The plan has been adjusted in the light of joint strategic needs assessment, contributions from children, families and carers and the recommendations of inspectorates in 2007/08, most of which have been implemented. Following re-organisation, social care services are now focused on priority areas and vulnerable groups. Investment in improvement is strong, but the council faces continuing capacity challenges both in the workforce and in providing services of good quality that match need. Further work on target setting within the CYPP is needed to ensure all targets are deliverable. Some baselines have been established for the local children and young people strategic partnerships but these are not yet fully in place. As a result, it is difficult to measure the effectiveness with

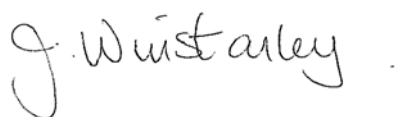
which devolved resources are used. Access to services is generally good, but with an increasingly diverse population, service planning needs to take equality and diversity fully into account. The council now has effective systems for monitoring performance and progress.

Major strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Good progress in many areas of partnership working is leading to improving outcomes for children and families. ▪ The council has made a significant effort to target resources and develop its workforce to tackle areas of pressure in service delivery, and invest in the future. ▪ Staff report that they are led and supported well.
Important weaknesses and areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ There is insufficient monitoring by the Local Children Safeguarding Board to ensure best safeguarding practice across the council. ▪ The delivery of frontline services with continuity and consistency.

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



Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager, Local Services Inspection