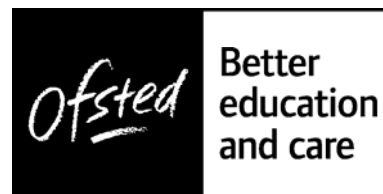


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Making Social Care
Better for People



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1 November 2006

Dear Ms Railton

2006 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN ESSEX COUNTY COUNCIL

This letter summarises the findings of the 2006 annual performance assessment process for your local authority. We are grateful for the information which you provided to support this process and for the time made available by yourself and your colleagues to discuss relevant issues.

Summary

Areas for judgement	Grade awarded¹
The contribution of <i>the local authority's children's services</i> in maintaining and improving outcomes for children and young people.	3
The council's overall <i>capacity to improve</i> its services for children and young people	3
The contribution of <i>the local authority's social care services</i> in maintaining and improving outcomes for children and young people	2

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Grade	Service descriptors	Capacity to improve descriptors
4	A service that delivers well above minimum requirements for users	Excellent / outstanding
3	A service that consistently delivers above minimum requirements for users	Good
2	A service that delivers only minimum requirements for users	Adequate
1	A service that does not deliver minimum requirements for users	Inadequate

In most aspects of its work Essex County Council consistently delivers above the minimum requirements for children and young people. The management of the service is good. The council's services make strong contributions to improving children and young people's health, to enabling them to make a positive contribution and to their economic well-being. Good progress has been made in improving transition planning, which was the basis of three areas for improvement last year. The proportion of all young people in education, employment and training is improving. Support for children and young people's enjoyment and achievement has some strengths, such as the intervention with schools causing concern. Attainment and progress are broadly in line with national trends, but comparing more favourably in primary than secondary schools. Effective action has been taken to improve the attendance and attainment of looked after children. The contribution of the council's services to children and young people staying safe, meet at least the minimum requirements. However, there has been no improvement in the placement stability for looked after children and there is a mixed picture in relation to the response times for the completion of core assessments. The council's social care services have improved in some respects and continue to meet the minimum requirements despite a continuing shortage of qualified social workers. The latter issue restricts the council's capacity to improve services, which is good overall but outstanding in some other respects.

Being healthy

The authority's contribution to outcomes in this area is good. The council's programme on being healthy recognises the role of parents and carers and engages partner agencies. It is delivered through the wider healthy schools initiative and associated programmes. The council's own development of healthy schools preceded the national campaign. With more than 90% of schools participating in the Healthy Schools programme, the authority is on course to achieve its target of 50% of schools achieving the Healthy Schools award. Most schools are also part of a School Sports Partnership ensuring that all children and young people take part in the recommended two hours of physical activity a week. As a result, the extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles is good or better in almost all primary and special schools and the majority of secondary schools. The evidence of increased physical exercise and healthier eating provides an early indication of progress in meeting the council's target to reduce childhood obesity and substance misuse. Teenage pregnancy rates continue to fall and are below that of similar councils and the national average.

The development of Child and Adolescent Mental Health services (CAMHS) is making satisfactory progress in establishing an overarching strategy for the whole of the county, replacing the two separate strategies for north and south Essex. Plans are in place to develop services to provide earlier and briefer intervention. There are good links with the Healthy Schools programme by, for example providing training for staff, and placing CAMHS workers in the Youth Offending Teams. Nevertheless, the county has made less progress than comparable local authority areas in establishing a fully comprehensive CAMHS.

The new strategy has led to measurable improvements in mental health services. Access to treatment for young people who misuse substances is very good and above the regional average, with almost all receiving treatment. In two quarters of the year, every juvenile referred with acute mental health difficulties was assessed within five days. This was not sustained into the last quarter, but there was an increase in the same period in the proportion of assessments of juveniles with non-acute mental health difficulties that were completed within 15 days.

The performance indicator on the health of looked after children has decreased and is now below the national average and that for similar authorities. However, the council's investigations have identified a problem of under reporting of health checks, which it has now addressed. Careful data validation showed that access to dental care, which was an area for improvement in the last annual performance assessment, is not a significant problem. Further work has been undertaken to identify any other underlying issues.

Staying safe

The authority's contribution to outcomes in this area is adequate. There are satisfactory interagency procedures for safeguarding children, and appropriate protocols for sharing information. The Local Safeguarding Children Board includes representatives from a range of agencies including the voluntary sector. Relative spend on family support remains good. There is a pooled budget and an agreed training plan in place. The child protection procedures have been developed together with neighbouring authorities. All schools inspected since September 2005 have been assessed as ensuring learners stay safe.

The council is experiencing significant difficulties in recruiting qualified social workers which reduces its capacity to improve the quality of social care. This is an area of concern. There has been a reduction in the percentage of young people who are allocated a qualified social worker. The council has taken steps to optimise its use of the resources currently available and allocated qualified social workers to complex cases, prioritising children on the Child Protection Register.

There has been an increase in the number of referrals for assessment of children in need; the numbers are above comparator authorities but below the national average. However, this has not led to any significant decrease in the number of children undergoing an initial assessment. Targets to reduce the number of referrals by 30 suggest that the council does not envisage inappropriate referral as a matter that can speedily be addressed, but it is taking action to improve its understanding of the source and nature of referrals. The performance on the number of initial assessments completed within seven days has declined. However the number of core assessments undertaken has increased slightly. The timescales for completing these has remained the same as for last year which is below the comparator and national averages but above that for the region. Eighty five percent of reviews were completed on time; which is above the comparator, regional and national averages.

The percentage of children on the Child Protection Register has decreased. However, the number of re-referrals of looked after children, including those on the Child Protection Register, has increased. Actions are in place to address both of these areas of performance, for example through improved post-registration support plans. The percentage of children who experience domestic violence has increased by over 20%. Work is being undertaken with partners to reduce the impact on children, for example by informing parents and carers about appropriate safeguarding for their children.

The stability of placements for looked after children has not improved and there has been no decline in the percentage experiencing three or more placements during the course of a year. This remains an area of concern. The council is working with partners, including the Department for Education and Skills, to address this issue. Placement capacity is being increased and this is improving placement choice. For example, regular recruitment campaigns have been successful in increasing the number of foster carers. The council has introduced a process for supporting placements and a system for capturing information about placement breakdowns to improve outcomes in this area.

The council has improved its performance on the numbers of children fostered by family and friends, and the percentage of those adopted remains very good. There has been an increase in the use of residential accommodation, but also a new admissions panel is in place to help support young people to remain at home. This additional family support has had a very positive impact on preventing a substantial number of children from becoming looked after.

Enjoying and achieving

The authority's contribution to outcomes in this area is adequate. Standards of attainment are broadly in line with those found nationally. The achievement and progress of children and young people in Essex is in line with that made by learners in similar contexts elsewhere. The council analyses outcomes in detail to identify groups who either under perform or achieve better than expected. Most groups achieve in line with national expectations. This includes children from minority ethnic groups, those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and those who are looked after, whose progress is now monitored closely.

Trends in attainment are generally positive in the primary phase where the authority has targeted some good intervention in low achieving schools. The positive impact of the innovative Essex Writing Project is evident on the increased percentage of boys reaching the expected level in English at the end of Key Stage 2. In Key Stages 3 and 4 the trends are positive, but overall the increases are smaller than those achieved nationally. In the secondary sector the total GCSE points score and the GCE points score are above average. This is generally as a result of taking more examinations, rather than as a result of higher standards within examinations. Performance indicators that control for this factor, such as the 'best 8' capped GCSE points score and the GCE points per entry are in line with the respective national averages. The percentage of looked after children achieving at least one GCSE is now good, with an increase of 13%

in this area. The percentage of looked after children achieving five or more GCSEs remains stable.

Enjoyment of school is good or better in nearly all schools, including most secondary schools. Effective action has been taken to improve the attendance and achievement of looked after children and to help prepare child carers for registration. The quality of early years education is generally good although there is more inadequate provision in early years settings than average. Work has been undertaken to improve the quality of assessment in the Foundation Stage. The quality of primary education is at least satisfactory in most schools. However, the proportion of schools in special measures is a little above average overall. This is because the proportion of secondary schools in special measures is significantly above average, as is the proportion of those subject to a notice to improve.

Nevertheless, there is good support to schools causing concern. The authority monitors and supports its schools well. There is well planned partnership work, including effective outreach from special schools to support inclusion in mainstream schools.

The authority tracks young people's whereabouts and educational provision efficiently. It plans effectively to meet the overall demand for school places, and looked after children are prioritised for admissions. General admissions arrangements are adequate, but students transferring mid year and hard to place students too often have unacceptably long waits for school places. The provision made for excluded students is inadequate and does not meet statutory requirements because most are offered much less than the number of hours they are entitled to receive.

Most schools provide good care, support and guidance, including meeting the needs of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, for whom there is prompt assessment of need. In early years, intervention to meet needs is effective in reducing the waiting time for support.

There are strategies to improve recreational and leisure opportunities, for example through school sports partnerships. There is additional support to enable vulnerable students to enjoy and achieve. Behaviour is good in almost all primary and most secondary schools. Authorised absence is above average in primary schools, but attendance in secondary schools is close to average. Permanent exclusions are in line with national averages. Appropriate action is being taken to tackle the worst cases of low attendance and poor behaviour.

Making a positive contribution

The authority's contribution to outcomes in this area is good. There are programmes being developed to improve attitudes among all young people and well targeted programmes to address the needs of particular groups, including offenders and those at risk of offending. Work with foster carers is in place to enable them to support vulnerable young people in their emotional and social well-being. The successful

Healthy Schools work has aspects that contribute well to helping young people to make a positive contribution.

Strenuous efforts are made to involve young people in developing the council's strategy for services to children and young people and also in designing and evaluating local services. The Young Essex Assembly is well established as a forum and council members go out of their way to inform and listen to the assembly. Most schools have school councils and are developing the student voice. Opportunities for engaging young people are being maximised, for example in the work undertaken with young carers and the efforts made to engage with hard to reach groups. A high proportion of vulnerable young people contribute to their reviews by talking about their feelings and opinions. Schools offer students many good opportunities to learn, to share and be tolerant, to develop responsibility, work together and show concern for other people and for their environment.

A transitions board is in place and positive work is underway to assist young people through periods of transition. A variety of stakeholders have been involved in the development of a well regarded transition planning tool, including young people and schools. The children's services are taking a holistic approach to the welfare of young people, for example considering employment and education as well as housing for those leaving care, and taking account of emotional and social well-being.

There is an integrated approach to improving the behaviour of young people through intensive work with targeted schools and by ensuring that all National Strategy consultants are able to give support on behaviour issues. There is a well established anti-bullying strategy. The Youth Service plays a significant role in personal and social development and has improved its contact with traditionally hard to reach groups, such as travellers. A decreasing number of looked after children are issued with final warnings, reprimands or convictions.

There are a number of effective support activities that encourage young people to make a contribution, including the well established Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme. Very good impact is demonstrated from newer initiatives such as the Backfire, Firebreak and Roadrunner programmes led by the fire and rescue service.

Efficiency gains have been made by ensuring that the contributions of different agencies are complementary. For example, support groups for young carers are hosted in youth centres so that youth workers can help the young people with their social development.

Achieving economic well-being

The authority's contribution to outcomes in this area is good. The proportion of young people in education, employment or training is in line with the national average and increasing. The proportion in education or work-based learning is improving faster than national performance. Action has been taken to encourage particular groups to remain in education or training, including travellers, young offenders and looked after children,

with good outcomes for care leavers. Post-16 participation for ethnic minorities is in line with or better than the white British group. The council has worked effectively with Connexions to improve participation in selected schools. The majority of these schools met their two year improvement target in the first year of the programme.

The council has developed its information strategy in response to its findings that most young people seek guidance from family members. The advice available via Connexions, schools and colleges is usually good. The quality of care, support and guidance is good in most secondary schools. The Children's Information Service is efficient and satisfaction with the Student and Pupil Financial Support Service has increased following improvements made in response to user comments. Benefits advice for families can now be provided through link workers following well regarded training from the council's benefits team. A strong promotion of the Education Maintenance Allowance has led to very good take up among those who are entitled. There is a good range of childcare provision and plans to develop it further. Work is continuing well to make preparations for additional children's centres, including developing strategies that can be implemented before a children's centre has a physical presence.

The authority and the local Learning and Skills Council (LLSC) have collaborated well in the strong development of the 14-19 strategy. Every secondary school is included in one of the local partnerships and each partnership is represented on a pan Essex group. The range of vocational pathways is growing. The curriculum in most secondary schools meets the range of needs and interests of learners well. Some of the partnerships are developing innovative solutions to meet local needs, such as the 14-19 vocational provision being developed in Clacton. Information about 14-19 provision is very good as a result of the 14-19 information website, which usefully links to information about transport. Local partnerships are developing protocols for monitoring the quality of teaching and learning, but these need further development.

The attainment of students on advanced GCE and VCE courses in schools is above average and improving. The authority and the LLSC have collaborated effectively to review sixth form provision, leading to intervention in a few cases.

There is coordination between health, social services and education to support children with particular needs. The views of young people are considered in reviews. All looked after children have pathway and transition plans and those leaving care have a named care worker. This is contributing to improved participation in post-16 education care leavers. There is also partnership working to offer more general support for all young people, for example through school nurses and multi-agency forums convened in schools to coordinate support to students.

Transition to adult services is improving as different parts of the children and young people's service work together with increasing effectiveness. The transitions board brings together Connexions, post-16 providers, the LLSC and the council's adult services. There are mechanisms to monitor the progress of vulnerable students from 16-24 and some informal monitoring beyond. The proportion of care leavers at age 19 who are living in suitable accommodation fell in 2005-06 and is now below average,

and the 2006-07 plan envisages little change. However, in partnership with district councils, the council is aiming for a small improvement in accommodation options for vulnerable young people. A partnership with the Prince's Trust and Connexions helps care leavers who are in supported lodgings to find suitable employment, education or training.

The council's management of its services for children and young people, including its capacity to improve them further

There is effective leadership in the provision of services to children. The Children and Young People's Plan is well thought out, with strong elements of partnership working and coherent contributions from different parts of the authority's service. However, for many of its actions, it is too early to judge their impact.

The council has good capacity to improve its services for children and young people with some outstanding features, but the shortage of qualified social workers reduces its capacity to improve social care outcomes. There is strong evidence of a shared vision and determination among senior officers. They show very good awareness of areas for development. Officers are reflective, determined and persevere in the face of challenges, trying new approaches where one has failed. There is a wide understanding of the role of partnership working and the role of commissioning. Very good use is made of pilots as a means of evaluating innovative approaches.

The council is very active in using data to analyse trends, identify performance issues and target resources effectively. There are a number of areas in which the council has identified a need to improve the accuracy of reporting or the quality of data. Examples include action to improve the recording of the health of looked after children and the establishment of a new post within the Connexions service to improve data sharing by agencies in relation to planning for transitions. More accurate data will further enhance the analysis of issues and targeting of resources.

In the Children and Young People's Plan the council has engaged with partners to establish priorities to improve outcomes. There is a developing coherence in its approach to working with young people, for example in reducing bullying and substance misuse, to maximise the use of resources. Some plans may appear unambitious at first sight but reflect efforts to reverse adverse trends, such as that on childhood obesity.

Priorities with partners have been aligned although, with a few exceptions, budgets are not pooled because of uncertainties arising from the reorganisation of some partners. Work is underway to improve value for money and maximise resources. For example, the council is a partner in regional work to commission more cost-effective services for looked after children. Budget expenditure is generally in line or above comparator councils.

The extensive range of plans and pilots being implemented suggests that the council mostly has the right staff in place. The council is no longer reporting difficulties in recruiting to central and strategic staff but it is rightly concerned about social worker recruitment. The proportion of qualified social worker posts that were vacant was twice as high in September 2005 than a year earlier. The council has acted to mitigate the impact of vacancies and expects to make a significant number of appointments during 2006. The council is maximising the resources available by using workers with alternative qualifications where possible. The council has good performance in training, with the exception of National Vocational Qualification Level 3 targets for residential care staff. There is a strong programme of training on induction of new staff.

Key strengths and areas for improvement

Key strengths	Key areas for improvement
<p><i>Being healthy:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the engagement of partners to reduce obesity and substance misuse the Healthy Schools and School Sports Partnership programmes. 	<p><i>Being healthy:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> monitoring the health of looked after children development of a comprehensive Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service.
<p><i>Staying safe:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the growth of kinship fostering arrangements to reduce the effect of the shortage of social workers. 	<p><i>Staying safe:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the stability of placements.
<p><i>Enjoying and achieving:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the impact of the boys' writing project support for schools causing concern support for inclusion through outreach from special schools. 	<p><i>Enjoying and achieving:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ensuring provision for excluded pupils meets statutory requirements the above average proportion of secondary schools causing concern.
<p><i>Making a positive contribution:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> coherence of the work of different parts of the service. 	<p><i>Making a positive contribution:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> none
<p><i>Achieving economic well-being:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the 14-19 partnerships and information support to maximise economic well-being for families through child care provision and benefit take up. 	<p><i>Achieving economic well-being:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> support that helps vulnerable young people to secure suitable accommodation when they leave care.

<p><i>Management of children's services:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • awareness of areas for development • use of resources • work with partners • coherence of approach • analysis of data to inform service delivery. 	<p><i>Management of children's services:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the accuracy of some data recording • the urgent need to recruit qualified social workers.
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Aspects for focus in a future joint area review or the next APA

Being healthy

Action is taken to promote children and young people's mental health:

- the authority's work to develop multi agency working to improve the outcomes for the health of children and young people, particularly those requiring services from CAMHS.

Looked after children's health needs are addressed:

- the accuracy and comprehensiveness of health assessments of looked after children.

Staying safe

The incidence of child abuse and neglect is minimised:

- referrals and assessments of children in need.

Looked after children live in safe environments and are protected from abuse and exploitation:

- the stability of placements for looked after children.

Enjoying and achieving

Action is taken to ensure that educational provision 5–16 is of good quality:

- the number of secondary schools in categories of concern.

Educational provision is made for children who do not attend school:

- statutory requirements to provide a full programme of education for excluded pupils.

Achieving economic well-being

Children and young people who are looked after are helped to achieve economic well-being:

- accommodation for vulnerable young people.

We confirm that the children's services grade will provide the score for the children and young people service block in the comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) and will be published to the Audit Commission. The social care judgement is for CSCI information only.

Yours sincerely



FLO HADLEY

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JONATHAN PHILLIPS

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Commission for Social Care Inspection