

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London WC2B 6SE

T 08456 404045

email: edhelpline@ofsted.gov.uk



Making Social Care
Better for People



Ms Liz Railton
Director of Children's Services
Essex County Council
PO Box 11
County Hall
Chelmsford
Essex
CM1 1LX

1 December 2005

Dear Ms Railton

**ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF ESSEX COUNTY COUNCIL'S
EDUCATION AND CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE SERVICES 2005**

This letter summarises the findings of the meeting held on 6 July 2005 to assess the performance of the education and social care services within your 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.

Being healthy

Outcomes in this area are good. Essex's performance on the health of looked after children is banded good, although the level has declined slightly over the past two years. The problems in gaining access to NHS dentists need to be tackled more effectively by the specialist medical staff for looked after children. There has been an improving trend in reducing rates of teenage conception, although the effect of deprivation on the relationship between conception and pregnancy requires further analysis when the vacant teenage pregnancy coordinator post is filled. There has been good progress in increasing the number of social work posts in the Child and Adolescent Mental Health services (CAMHS), and in raising the profile of CAMHS in PCT commissioning of Tier 2 services but further work is required in mapping Tier 3 and 4 services before developing a commissioning strategy. The high level of drug and alcohol misuse among care leavers has been identified as a problem. Funding from The Prince's Trust is being invested in a pilot project to develop a risk assessment tool which will be used to develop pathway plans and support Essex's LPSA 2 target. The council is confident that all schools will be signed up as Healthy Schools by the government's target date in 2006, and inspection evidence of schools' work in sex and relationship education and participation in sport is mostly good.

Staying safe

Outcomes in this area are good. Essex's performance on the three national child protection indicators ranges from good to very good and the level of child protection activity is in line with similar councils. All cases are allocated and all child protection reviews were completed on time. Schools have satisfactory arrangements for child protection support. While there is good performance on achieving initial assessments within seven days - the best in the Eastern region - the proportion of core assessments completed within 35 days has fallen from 80% to 60% in the past year, but remains acceptable in overall performance banding. Changes in data collection practices are producing greater accuracy.

The number of looked after children has fallen and all but one per cent are allocated to a qualified social worker. The balance of placements is shifting from residential to foster care, from high to low cost, and from out of county to local. A high proportion of children are placed with relatives and friends. However, there are still problems in achieving stability of placements, both long and short term. Managers have identified a problem of placement breakdowns occurring at around 18 months, and preventative support mechanisms are under discussion. The rate of adoptions continues to be high and is very good.

The budget for children's social care is now securely funded. Essex is making very good progress in achieving better value in placements, through deploying its substantial purchasing power, and in developing high quality in-house residential services. The unit cost for looked after children is under the national and comparator group average.

All care leavers have personal advisers and pathway plans and there has been progress in developing a wider range of suitable accommodation options, working alongside district councils. A good proportion of care leavers return to live at home, often assisted by family group conferences. However, less than 75% of children with disabilities have transition plans at 14 years and this is unsatisfactory. The ratio of children in need from Black and minority ethnic groups to that in the general child population is in line with comparators, but the ratio for these children who are looked after and in the child protection system is higher. The council has good plans to reduce it by more culturally sensitive working.

Enjoying and achieving

Outcomes in this area are satisfactory. The overall quality of early years provision is satisfactory but there is a high level of actions on regulatory visits to some providers. Results at the end of Key Stage 1 are in line with national averages and statistical neighbours and reading shows some improvement. Standards at Key Stage 2, although in line with the national average, show a drop in the levels reached in English and Science and a minority of schools were below the floor targets. At Key Stage 3

standards are in line with national averages and statistical neighbours and have risen for English. The support provided by the education service in implementing the Key Stage 3 strategy has had positive outcomes. Standards in key stages 4 and 5 are in line with averages nationally and statistical neighbours. Results at GCSE are in line with national averages and statistical neighbours and show a slightly improved picture. The average point scores of students entered for GCE/VCE/A/AS in schools with sixth forms is above the national average. Where the authority has targeted support to schools causing concern and to those in receipt of the Leadership Incentive Grant these schools have shown a higher rate of improvement. Progress between Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 remains steady and in line with the national average. Between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 and between Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 progress is just below the national average. There are significant gender differences in performance at every key stage but particularly at Key Stage 2 where girls outperform boys by 16% in writing; similarly at Key Stage 3 English and in the 12% difference in those gaining 5 A*-C at GCSE.

The proportion of looked after children gaining one or more GCSE is at an acceptable level, although under the planned level for 2004, and below the comparator group and national average. However the proportion of looked after children achieving at least five A*-C GCSE has improved significantly since last year and is now above both Eastern Region and comparator group averages. The council is introducing a new compliance system, with training for school staff to increase the proportion of looked after children with personal education plans from the current level of 61% per cent. The proportion of looked after children out of school for more than 25 days has increased over the past two years.

Attendance at both primary and secondary schools is in line with statistical neighbours and national averages for unauthorised absence. Authorised absence in primary schools is higher than that of statistical neighbours. The authority has effectively used a multi-agency approach to target attendance in schools causing concern. The rate of exclusions is better than that of statistical neighbours and other authorities. There have been a small number of exclusions from special schools.

Support for schools placed in formal categories of concern by Ofsted is good. The speed of removal from a specific category is better than the national average and statistical neighbours. While there are still some concerns about the number of schools judged to require special measures or to be under achieving, the authority has used data to target support carefully and its differentiated support to schools is having an impact. The council's Corporate Parenting Service has a range of strategies to promote the enjoyment and achievement of looked after children although the impact of these initiatives is at an early stage.

Making a positive contribution

Outcomes in this area are good. There is a good range of preventative activity in the Youth Offending Service (YOS). Crime rates are lower than both national rates and those of statistical neighbours. The rate of final warnings, reprimands and convictions of looked after children has fallen since last year and is now lower than both national and comparator group averages. Although there has been a rise in the number of first time offenders in the criminal justice system and this is above the national average, the target for reducing re-offending has been met. The number of young offenders supervised by the YOS who are in full time education at the end of their orders is below the national target. There is more work to do to increase the number of young people leaving custody who attend school or college and to reduce the number who receive less than 25 hours per week full time education. The council has some good local behaviour support initiatives to involve parents.

The work of the Corporate Parenting Service is good and is beginning to have an impact and services for young carers are well co-ordinated. Specific guides on fostering and adoption have been produced for looked after children and on bullying and complaints for children with disabilities. These encourage children and young people to express their views and contribute to the development of services. The council has a clear strategy for consultation with young people to ensure their participation in decision-making with some evidence of impact in local areas, for example where advocacy services have been established and in a Libraries Service initiative. An annual survey of the Youth Service showed that 92% per cent of young people were satisfied with the service.

The large majority of children and young people are given adequate support in managing significant changes in their lives. The council has a considerably higher proportion of looked after children contributing their opinions at reviews than both its statistical neighbours and the national average. There are targeted initiatives for both children with disabilities and for black and minority ethnic children. The work of the Connexions team helps ensure that young people with learning difficulties and disabilities are fully prepared for the transition from school to post-school learning and employment.

Achieving economic well-being

Outcomes in this area are satisfactory overall. There are some useful initiatives to increase the range of vocational options through the Increasing Flexibility partnerships for 14-19. However the 14-19 strategy is at an early stage of development and its impact has yet to be evaluated. There is some targeted support for black and minority ethnic pupils. The council has a strong focus on reducing the number of racist incidents in schools.

The support given to looked after children, for example by the use of pathway plans, ensures that the numbers entering employment and training are very good - the highest in the Eastern region and nearly 50% better than the national average. The council has made good progress in providing accommodation for young people leaving care which helps support this transition. However, too few young people continue into further and higher education. The progression of young people with learning difficulties and disabilities into further education and training is satisfactory and the council is working with the local Learning and Skills Council to improve post-16 transition for this group.

Standards of education provided by schools' sixth forms and sixth form colleges are generally good. The proportion of young people progressing to higher education or training has improved and is in line with national averages. However, this remains a priority area for the council.

SUMMARY

Strengths	Areas for improvement
<p><i>Being healthy:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the health of looked after children the good progress in CAMHS Tier 2 services and staffing. 	<p><i>Being healthy:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> dental care for looked after children drug and alcohol misuse by care leavers.
<p><i>Staying safe:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> numbers of looked after children the good response to the initial assessment timescales the rising trends in placement patterns and in the adoptions rate best value in the budget the child protection system. 	<p><i>Staying safe:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the response times for the completion of core assessments the placement stability for looked after children transition planning for young people with disabilities.
<p><i>Enjoying and achieving:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the action taken to target support carefully and effectively for schools causing concern the good use made of national strategies. 	<p><i>Enjoying and achieving:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the attendance and achievements of looked after children the preparation of child care providers for registration.
<p><i>Making a positive contribution:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the action taken to prevent offending by children and young people who are looked after the opportunities for looked after children to make a positive contribution and to participate in decision making. 	<p><i>Making a positive contribution:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> evaluation of the impact of the participation of children and young people in decision making and supporting the community provision for young people leaving custody the proportion of all young people in education employment and training.

<p><i>Achieving economic well-being:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the employment and training of young people who are looked after useful initial strategies to plan and deliver 14-19 education and training in a co-ordinated way. 	<p><i>Achieving economic well-being:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the transition of young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities into post 16 opportunities the participation in further education of young people who are looked after.
--	---

Service management

The authority has a clear commitment to achieving the *Every Child Matters* outcomes. It has developed strong partnerships and is working closely with these partners, including voluntary groups, to meet the challenging targets it has set for improvement. The views of parents and carers and children and young people form part of this planning, although it is not always clear how these have been taken into account in establishing priorities for development.

Substantial progress is being made in moving towards the production of a single children and young people's plan from 2006. The current strategic plan is under review and the recently published post Ofsted inspection plan addresses many issues. The authority knows its strengths and weaknesses well. It participates in a wide range of national initiatives and uses these well to improve outcomes for children and young people. The education service targets its support to schools effectively and the schools' confidence in the service is shown in the high level of buy back. The appointment of a Director of Children's Services positions the council well for its developing service.

The council is tackling its recruitment and retention difficulties both through the use of overseas staff and by investment in training to develop its existing staff. Turnover, vacancy and sickness rates are now all better than average. Although the achievement of NVQ Level 3 among residential staff is below average, there are plans for a substantial increase. The training budget appears below average and the council intends to investigate its returns.

The council is aware of continuing pressure points on its budget for children's services but is confident that it has stabilised the budget following the disaggregation from adult services. There is an increasingly positive balance between the costs of looked after children and the spending on preventative services, and the council is vigorously pursuing better value in its placement purchasing.

The council serves a large and diverse area and while there are good examples of local initiatives many have not yet been evaluated and used to inform overall strategy. The extension of partnership into 25 clusters of schools is at an embryonic stage. As reported in the recent Ofsted inspection, the council still needs to improve its data collection and analysis to support social inclusion and quality of life strategies, and to

implement information-sharing and assessment systems. It has plans to join social care and education data into one system.

The council has good capacity to improve further.

Areas for exploration in the Joint Area Review

Being healthy

Healthy life-styles are promoted for children and young people:

- the impact of the teenage pregnancy strategy on conception rates.

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.

Staying safe

The incidence of child abuse and neglect is minimised:

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

- the council's use of data to monitor and evaluate district variations
- the stability of placements for looked after children.

Enjoying and achieving

Children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are helped to enjoy and achieve:

- the impact of the council's SEN and inclusion strategy, particularly in relation to ethnicity (links to economic well-being).

Making a positive contribution

Children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are helped to make a positive contribution:

- the impact of work to improve post 16 transition

Achieving economic well-being

Action is taken to ensure that 14-19 education and training is planned and delivered in a co-ordinated way, and to ensure that education and training (16-19) is of good quality:

- the impact of work to develop the 14-19 strategy.

Final judgements

Please see your final annual performance assessment judgements attached at the end of this letter.

Yours sincerely



Flo Hadley

Divisional Manager
Office for Standards in Education



Jonathan Phillips

Director – Quality, Performance and Methods
Commission for Social Care Inspection

APA final judgements 2005: Essex County Council

Areas for judgement	Final judgements ¹
The contribution of <i>the local authority's social care services</i> in maintaining and improving outcomes for children and young people	3
The contribution of <i>local authority's education services</i> in maintaining and improving outcomes for children and young people.	3
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 capacity to improve its services for children and young people	3

1

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