

26 November 2007

Mr Peter Wylie
Divisional Director of Children's services
London Borough of Croydon
Taberner House
Park Lane
Croydon
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Dear Mr Wylie

2007 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE LONDON BOROUGH OF CROYDON

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) where it was available, and the evidence and briefings provided by Ofsted, other inspectorates and relevant bodies. Thank you 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 2

Croydon Borough Council consistently delivers services for children and young people at an adequate level with some significant strengths. The council's contributions to being healthy, staying safe and achieving economic well-being are good, with strong partnership working and effective alignment across services. The contributions made to enjoying and achieving and making a positive contribution are adequate and there are strengths in each area. Some progress has been made in addressing the main recommendations of the APA carried out in 2006. However, aspects of the council's work such as raising standards in science, improving attendance and reducing exclusions remain areas where further improvement is necessary. There is a strong commitment from the council to develop high quality, locally based partnerships which represent all relevant groups and, to ensure improving outcomes for all children and young people.

Being healthy

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this area is good, with improved outcomes in a number of areas.

Partners work hard to ensure that children have a good start to life through the reduction of the number of mothers who smoke during pregnancy and increased numbers who are supported to breast-feed. As a result, practices have been revised and improved with the implementation of national maternity guidance. The physical health of children in Croydon is good, with levels of immunisation improving in most areas. Emergency admissions to Accident and Emergency Departments are well below the national average. Dental health is significantly better than the national indicators. Whilst numbers of low birth weight babies are still above national indicators, levels of infant mortality are falling. Recent decisions to co-locate maternity services in children's centres are aimed at further promoting effective work in this area.

The local authority is aware of the health inequalities within the borough and works effectively with partners to offer interventions to address these, including provision of specialised services in areas with a high level of deprivation. The Childhood Obesity strategy is in place, following concerns about high levels of obesity in the borough, and the Healthy Schools Programme has been the main component in developing this strategy. Early indicators show that obesity levels have now begun to reduce. From a low base last year the local authority has made significant progress in engaging schools to meet the Healthy School Standard with all pupil referral units participating in the programme. As a result, the local authority is projected to meet the national target this year. From inspection data, schools were shown to be at least satisfactory in encouraging healthy lifestyles.

Whilst the conception rates for teenage pregnancies have not yet been met, the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy has a high profile within the borough and officers have rightly commissioned services on the basis of evaluation and good practice. Targeted work has been undertaken with the hard-to-reach groups, for example through the Talk Bus and Drop-In centres which aim to support the most vulnerable. Despite this work, Chlamydia levels are above the national averages and are particularly high in those aged under 16.

A comprehensive Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) is provided through the South London and Maudsley Hospital Trust. This offers a full service for all children and young people until the age of 18. All children and young people who require Tier 4 services have designated child and adolescent provision. An increased number of children and young people have received drugs treatment over this year. Increased resources within the last year have resulted in a good reduction in waiting times; these now meet the national target. However, protocols with adult services are not yet in place to ensure effective transition arrangements. The youth offending team (YOT) meets its target for CAMHS assessment and referrals and has a discrete worker deployed to support children and young people who are at risk of offending.

Most looked after children and young people continue to have their health checked regularly. Their reviews are undertaken by the school nursing service whose employees receive specific training and support from the designated nurse for children and young people looked after by the authority. The local authority has recently audited these health reviews and recognises that there is a need for further

improvement in their focus. The council has taken positive steps to encourage healthy living by ensuring that all looked after children have a leisure pass which offers them free access to the leisure and sporting facilities in the borough. Mental health support for looked after children has recently been re-organised to offer better quality provision. However, specific sexual health and drugs screening for this group is still insufficiently focused.

Improvements have been made to the provision for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Speech and language therapy has improved through the successful training of teachers and improved links between speech and language therapists and special needs co-ordinators in schools. In addition, opportunities have been made for schools to purchase additional services. Increased provision to the CAMHS service has resulted in an improved service for children and young people with Attention Deficit Disorder.

Areas for development

- Improve sexual health and drugs screening provision for looked after children and young people.
- Improve transition arrangements by securing protocols between CAMHS and the adult mental health services.

Staying safe

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving the outcomes for children and young people in this aspect continues to be good.

Parents and carers have good access to parenting support and programmes to help them provide an appropriate environment for their children. Schools are actively involved in enhancing the ability of children and young people to manage their own safety, through structured programmes and road safety information and training.

It is reported in the CYPP that children and young people in Croydon are concerned about bullying and being victims of crime. Whilst individual schools and organisations have been successfully offering individual responses to the problems of bullying, the leadership and co-ordination of the authority's policies and procedures have been slow to develop. Work began in November 2006 with a conference followed by scoping and consultation exercises but the final implementation of the borough's bullying strategy is not due to take place until March 2008.

The numbers of referrals to social care are in line with national averages and those of statistical neighbours. Numbers progressing to initial and core assessment stages are considerably lower because of intensive management oversight of new referrals which is intended to ensure that services are well targeted at those most in need. A process is in place to refer others to more appropriate services. The level of repeat referrals is well below comparators and the majority of assessments are completed

within prescribed timescales. The system of managing case conferences is also robust with all conferences being held within the appropriate timescales. Numbers on the child protection register are growing but nonetheless remain lower than comparator indicators. Children and young people remain on the register for a similar amount of time as in other comparator areas with numbers de-registered being good. All children on the child protection register are allocated to a qualified social worker and serious case reviews are effectively managed and current reviews are planned to report within agreed timescales.

The local authority has recently audited its compliance with safeguarding checks and identified some shortfalls in its current system. However, it is working hard, particularly with schools, to ensure compliance with the legislation. The Croydon Safeguarding Children Board (CSCB) offers a high level of scrutiny to the safeguarding work of the borough with a number of well placed sub-groups to support its work. The invitation to the YOT manager to join the CSCB offers further expertise but there is a lack of a direct link between the CSCB and schools.

Whilst the spending by the local authority on family support is below that of similar authorities, a good range of services is available with funding augmented from other funding sources, such as Neighbourhood Renewal funding and the Children's Fund. These services are largely targeted in areas of high deprivation, such as New Addington Fieldways, and the local authority plans to further generate capacity through the development of local delivery partnerships, working within the local area agreement targets.

A high proportion of children and young people looked after by the authority are unaccompanied asylum seekers and they receive good services from the council to meet their specialist needs. The quality of the fostering service is good; most looked after children live in foster placements and the stability of these placements is better than national averages. Reviews are timely and children and young people contribute to them. There is also good support from the specialist Leaving Care team to help with transition into adulthood. There is an increasing number of children and young people placed for adoption, although once a decision to adopt has been taken, placements are not made quickly enough.

Children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have access to a good range of specialist services and almost all of those reaching the transitional stage to adult services have an appropriate plan in place.

Areas for development

- Ensure that anti-bullying policies and procedures are developed and implemented within agreed timescales.
- Reduce the timescales for children and young people to be placed with adoptive families.
- Ensure universal implementation of safeguarding checks on individuals prior to their commencement of work.

Enjoying and achieving

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate with some significant strengths.

Most children get a good start to their education. The quality of provision in early years settings as demonstrated by inspection outcomes is usually satisfactory and often good. Standards in the Foundation Stage are rising and are now just above national expectations. The local authority provides good support and expertise to ensure that schools are assessing these early skills accurately and that they have an improving understanding of this stage of learning.

In Key Stage 1, standards have remained static over time and although overall attainment is generally in line with national averages and similar authorities, fewer children in Year 2 achieve at the higher levels than those nationally. Standards at Key Stages 2, 3 and 4 are improving at a faster rate than the national trend, particularly in English, and are now broadly average. Value added measures show that generally children and young people make at least satisfactory progress over time. In Key Stage 2, there has been an increase in the number of children and young people achieving at the higher level and some improvements in boys' achievement. In addition, the most recent results in Key Stage 3 indicate that standards in mathematics are improving well, although there is scope for further improvement at the higher level. The attainment of 5+ A*-C grades at GCSE is in line with national averages. When English and mathematics are included this profile falls to just below the national average but it is still in line with similar authorities.

Science is the weakest area across all phases and standards remain below national averages. Several advanced skills teachers are providing good quality but a limited quantity of support in primary schools and the authority has found it difficult to provide effective support at secondary level. Officers report that this situation is exacerbated by the difficulty which schools face in recruiting and retaining good quality science department leaders.

The local authority is keenly aware that there is wide variation in the progress made by children in different schools. Good improvements to the systems for gathering and analysing information about schools mean that the authority now knows its schools very well. It uses this information to good effect and provides effective, well-targeted support and intervention. This has resulted in improved outcomes, for example in a reduction to the number of schools achieving below the government's 'minimum targets', an increase in boys' achievement and a rise in standards in mathematics at Key Stage 3. The local authority undertakes detailed analysis and provides sharply focused support to raise the attainment of children and young people from its wide range of Black and minority ethnic communities. Early indications show that, although the lower than average attainment of some Black and minority ethnic groups remains a concern, there is evidence that some of the lowest performing groups, for example Black Caribbean boys, are beginning to close the gap.

Ofsted inspections indicate that, in the schools inspected, children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities generally make good progress. All of the six special schools inspected were judged to be at least satisfactory and the overall effectiveness of three of them was judged to be outstanding. The local authority is taking a broad range of actions to develop greater expertise about learning difficulties and disabilities and to build capacity within its schools, although the number of young people who are currently placed outside the borough in independent and non-maintained special schools remains very high. The attainment of children and young people looked after by the authority is rapidly improving and is good compared with national averages. Those leaving care with five or more A*-C grades at GCSE achieve well above national averages.

The attendance of children and young people looked after by the authority is at an acceptable level compared with other authorities. Attendance generally remains lower than national averages, particularly in primary schools. The authority has closely monitored and analysed the reasons for this and, as a result, is taking action across schools and children's centres to raise the importance of attendance and punctuality. The number of exclusions remains high and permanent exclusions from secondary schools are much higher than nationally; this includes higher than average numbers of children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities excluded from special schools. Officers have identified a strong correlation between low academic achievement, low attendance and high exclusion rates amongst the lowest achieving groups. As a result, the local authority has set up a multi-agency behaviour task force, which aims to tackle the causes of behaviour problems, increase mainstream schools' ability and willingness to manage behaviour difficulties, and prevent exclusions.

The local authority has good systems in place to identify, challenge and support individual schools and the number of schools placed in Ofsted categories of concern is in line with similar authorities. Well-planned support has resulted in schools causing concern making good improvements. A multi-agency, high profile School Improvement Board has been recently established to further sharpen the focus on this area.

Areas for development

- Raise standards in Key Stage 1 and standards in science across all key stages.
- Improve attendance in primary schools.
- Help schools to develop more effective strategies for managing behaviour and reducing exclusions.
- Reduce the high number of children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities being placed out of borough.

Making a positive contribution

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the authority in this area is adequate with some good features. The provision for children and young people to make a positive contribution is broadly in line with national indicators. Adequate mentoring provision is available through the Millennium Volunteers group which has developed peer mentoring in Croydon. As a result, peer mentoring is now established in seven schools and within the Leaving Care team. Mentoring support is also made available through Connexions and the Youth Service. Children and young people who have suffered from bereavement have access to specialist services. Those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have access to enhanced support at times of transition, particularly into adult provision.

There has been consultation with, and participation of, children and young people, in the development of the CYPP, but there is little evidence of impact of consultations on the formation of policy and practice. The Youth Service is developing its capacity through a new Active Involvement Team and is currently auditing local mechanisms in order to improve consultation in line with the Hear by Right Standards. Adequate structures are in place to consult with children and young people who access universal services and to encourage their participation, for example through the Youth Forum and Youth Opportunities Fund, but these are limited for the more vulnerable groups. A consultation event for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities was held during last year in relation to the CYPP but there is no evidence of on-going consultation with this group.

The Youth Crime Prevention Strategy Group co-ordinates the multi-agency response to anti-social behaviour and youth crime and has worked effectively with its partners. Whilst there are high youth crime rates in Croydon with increasing levels of seriousness, there has been a reduction in re-offending. In addition, levels of offending by those entering the criminal justice system have met national targets, although these compare less well with reductions achieved in other authorities. There are some sound strategies in place to address high levels of youth crime. For example, all children and young people who may be subject to an Anti-Social Behaviour Order (ASBO) are discussed at a case conference prior to the application for an order. In addition, an active Youth Inclusion and Support Panel (YISP) offers short-term individual support to those at risk of anti-social behaviour or crime. This panel has good support from mainstream services to support its work. A Junior Youth Inclusion Programme (JYIP) is also in place and it has good links with local schools. The YOT offers a broad range of programmes to address offending behaviour and access to mental health services is good. However, the percentage of children and young people who offend accessing education, training and employment is well below the national target and national averages for performance.

The percentage of looked after children and young people who contribute to their planning and reviews is good compared with national rates and similar authorities. There has been some disruption over the past year in the participation and advocacy

for these children due to the re-commissioning of the service. However, the new service providers are working hard to develop effective participation and consultation and extend the service into new areas for the local authority. This extends to involvement with the Corporate Parenting Panel and the involvement of children and young people in the recruitment of staff. Within the CYPP, looked after children asked to be involved in opportunities to become volunteers, although this has yet to be developed. Re-offending rates for looked after children are well below national figures which is the result, in part, of clear policies regarding the management of incidents in foster and residential settings. Low re-offending rates are also due to close links with the YISP and the additional support this offers.

Areas for development

- Extend and improve the effectiveness of consultation with, and participation of, children and young people in decisions that affect them.
- Enable more children and young people, who have offended, to take up education, employment or training.

Achieving economic well-being

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good.

There is good provision for adult education, family learning and parental skills development. For example, a Reading Champion for looked after children is employed to work with children and their carers to foster a love of books and reading. This good quality provision is linked to increasingly effective extended schools and a rapidly developing children's centre programme, which are well focused on areas of greatest need. Strong links have been established between children's centres and Job Centre Plus and there is encouraging early evidence of parents accessing training and progressing to employment.

The strategy for 14–19 education is developing well with all schools and colleges involved and the local authority is providing a good range of courses. Officers have identified the need to increase the engagement of employers in relation to curriculum development and to improve the opportunities for work-based learning. The attainment of young people at Levels 2 and 3 and participation rates of 17 year olds are above national averages.

A well-devised strategy for reducing the number of young people not engaged in education, employment or training is having a positive impact and the percentage is reducing. The percentage of young people not engaged in education, employment or training has improved from below satisfactory and is better than statistical neighbours. The local authority has successfully ensured that higher than average numbers of young people re-engage in education, employment and training. Some of its strategies for engaging young people have been particularly successful, for

example with those young people looked after by the authority, and with teenage mothers.

Effective action is being taken to ensure that vulnerable young people, particularly those leaving care, are in appropriate accommodation and the percentage of this group living in suitable accommodation is higher than average. The number of families with children living in hostels is very low relative to other councils and the length of time families stay in bed and breakfast accommodation is reducing in line with other authorities.

Area for development

- Develop better links with employers in order to increase and improve provision for work-based learning.

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

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The council has an adequate capacity to improve its services for children and young people and the management of these services is also adequate. There are significant strengths in these areas and positive indications that the extensive and important groundwork which has taken place during the last year, has resulted in a children's service which has the potential to lead to improvement.

A great deal of carefully planned, well-researched work has been undertaken to establish the new children's services and set it off on the right track. The authority has sought to undertake change at a deep level, building on existing good practice and establishing imaginative partnership and management structures. It has made good use of external expertise during the changeover and a number of senior vacancies have been filled by highly experienced interim officers, who widen the experience and expertise of the council. This expertise at the highest level has supported the changeover to the new directorate's structure, although the temporary nature of the posts limits the capacity for, and sustainability of, improvement. All Assistant Director posts have now been filled and the newly appointed officers take up their posts later in the year. Further recruitment is also underway to establish the leadership and staffing required to carry out the restructuring plan. There is a strong, well-supported and active commitment to multi-agency and partnership working and good alignment across services, which are increasingly well targeted at local level.

Partnerships with schools are not yet as strong as with other agencies and a key challenge for the authority is to secure the cooperation and collaboration of schools to deliver inclusive and accessible services. There is improving communication and increased engagement with schools in the development of the local delivery partnerships. These aspects of work with schools are at an early stage of development but the signs are promising. The authority shows some commitment to consultation with young people and families and opportunities for them to contribute

to decision-making. However, the mechanisms for ensuring participation are not systematic or comprehensive enough.

The CYPP is ambitious but also practical and well-structured with a good emphasis on establishing effective partnership working. It is based on a comprehensive analysis of need and appropriate priorities have been set with good attention paid to the needs and outcomes for the most vulnerable groups. The plan takes good account of local circumstances, including the social and ethnic diversity in the borough. Suitable review mechanisms are in place, although, from the information available, it is not always clear who is leading the implementation of different sections of the action plan. Some actions are not clearly linked to priorities, nor focused sharply enough on achieving better outcomes for young people. The council has yet to identify developmental milestones as a way of measuring progress.

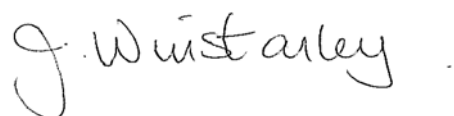
Budgets are tight but well managed. High costs in some areas, for example the unit costs for looked after children in residential care and, expenditure on out-of-borough placements for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, result in cost restrictions elsewhere. The authority works well with a range of external partners to maximise grant income which is then well targeted at improving outcomes for children and young people. The council is using a good range of strategies to improve recruitment and retention, but despite this, staff turnover and vacancies in some areas, particularly in the teaching force, remain high.

Areas for development

- Improve partnerships to ensure better communication, collaboration and cooperation with schools.
- Sharpen the focus of improvement planning on outcomes for children and young people.

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 "J. Winstanley".

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager
Local Services Inspection