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5 June 2009

Mrs Sue Imbriano
Director of Children's Services
Buckinghamshire County Council
Room 20E
County Hall
Walton Street
Aylesbury
HP20 1UA

Dear Mrs Imbriano

Annual performance assessment of services for children and young people in Buckinghamshire 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	3
Being healthy	3
Staying safe	3
Enjoying and achieving	3
Making a positive contribution	3
Achieving economic well-being	3
Capacity to improve, including the management of services for children and young people	4

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

Overall effectiveness of children’s services

Grade 3

Buckinghamshire County Council makes a good contribution to improving outcomes for children and young people and delivers services most of which are consistently above minimum requirements. It has greatly improved many of its relevant services since the joint area review (JAR) inspection two years ago, and most of these actions are already beginning to have a clear impact on the lives of children and young people. Since the 2007 APA, further progress has been made to improve services to some of the most vulnerable young people. Whilst maintaining very high educational outcomes for the majority of children and young people, the council has prioritised narrowing the gap in educational outcomes between the most and the least successful children and young people. It is beginning to achieve success in many key areas.

Service management is outstanding and senior leaders of the Children’s and Young People’s Directorate have an in-depth understanding of how much they have achieved and also a very clear vision of where priorities for the future lie. Officers have identified accurately where further progress needs to be made in improving the life chances of young people, particularly for those in the most deprived areas of the county and from the Black and minority ethnic communities. Significant progress has been made in some areas over the last year. The council now has an outstanding capacity to improve further.

Being healthy

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 being healthy is consistent with the evidence.

<p>Major strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Significant improvement in joint partnership work with the Primary Care Trust (PCT) to re-commission Tier 2 and Tier 3 Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). ▪ Increased physical activity in schools to help tackle obesity. ▪ Good multi-disciplinary assessment for disabled children, including those with complex needs.
<p>Important weaknesses and areas for development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Within CAMHS, the reduction of waiting lists for non-specialist services and the provision of therapeutic services for abused children. ▪ Access for looked after children to CAMHS and substance misuse services.

Staying safe

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.

<p>Major strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Good processes prevent children being looked after; improvements have been made in care planning and review and the numbers of looked after children have fallen significantly. ▪ An efficient service is achieving high numbers adopted or subject to special guardianship orders. ▪ A high number of disabled children receive respite care and all have a transition plan to adult care services.
<p>Important weaknesses and areas for development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The proportion of initial assessments completed on time and the rate of core assessments being completed. ▪ Over-representation of children from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds in those who are looked after or subject to child protection plans.

Enjoying and achieving

Grade 3

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. The council's self-evaluation gives too much weight to the significance of improvements that have been made and underestimates some key areas where outcomes, whilst improving, are not yet outstanding.

<p>Major strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Standards are consistently above both statistical neighbours and national averages at the end of Key Stage 2 and, in particular, well above at the end of Key Stages 3 and 4. ▪ Results show a steadily rising trend over time in all areas of performance, for example, performance at five or more A* to C grade GCSEs in 2007 including English and mathematics compares very favourably with statistical neighbours. ▪ Looked after children make good progress at Key Stage 2 and good procedures are in place to develop further success at Key Stage 4. Children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make good progress.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- GCSE standards in 2007 were below the national floor target in eight out of the 34 secondary schools, and young people overall made less progress between Key Stages 2 and 4 than those nationally.
- Despite some improvements, for example the rise in standards attained by students of Pakistani heritage, the pace of narrowing the gap between pupil groups generally remains too slow.
- Black and minority ethnic students are over-represented in exclusion figures and too few excluded pupils receive the required 21+ hours of alternative tuition.

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 in this outcome area is consistent with the evidence.

Major strengths

- Increased consultation with young people has had an impact in a number of areas, for example, housing protocols and foster care procedures.
- Strong support services for young carers.
- A consistently good Youth Offending Team, where effective management has led to a reduction in first-time entrants to the youth justice system, and below average rates of re-offending.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- Involvement of looked after children, children with disabilities and those from Traveller backgrounds in the 'mainstream' process of consultation and participation.
- Over representation of Black and Black British young people as first-time entrants to the youth justice system.

Achieving economic well-being

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

- Higher than national average standards and achievement from 16–19.

- A marked acceleration in the growth of recruitment to post-16 courses at all levels and in both halves of the county.
- Through two 14–19 regional partnerships and improved links with business partners, young people are being offered an increasing range of opportunities for education and training.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- The lack of commitment on the part of some schools to 14–19 developments, including vocational qualifications and diplomas.
- Access for KS4 students to impartial careers education, information, advice and guidance.

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

Grade 4

The council’s capacity to improve its services for children and young people is outstanding and its management of these services is good. There is strong and well-informed leadership and highly effective co-operation between partner agencies, both at strategic and operational levels. The council has recognised key areas of relative weakness and has made progress in addressing some of the effects of inequalities. It has maintained the very high standards historically achieved by many children in its schools, whilst also increasingly prioritising those schools, and those groups of children, where achievement is unacceptably low. Strategies to reduce the gap in educational outcomes through the Black and Minority Ethnic Development Plan are beginning to make a difference. A focus on looked after children has made important changes to improve the quality of their lives, and the council has clear and appropriate plans for still further improvement. Partnership work with a range of key partners has contributed to the potential for achievement of many vulnerable children. Performance management is robust. Financial management is a strength, with careful evaluation of costs underpinning planning at all levels. For example, the retention of council-run residential accommodation for looked after children represents good value for money. Commissioning is of a high quality. A joint commissioning unit has been established with the new PCT which now covers the whole of the county. Effective monitoring has led to increasingly effective and efficient services where weaknesses are detected early and decommissioning undertaken rapidly. There has been a consistent trend of improvement in children’s services.

Major strengths

- Good progress on social care performance indicators. Clear improvement in outcomes and support for looked after children.
- Thorough and incisive self-evaluation which identifies accurately areas of priority.
- A leadership team with very strong capacity to make further improvements.

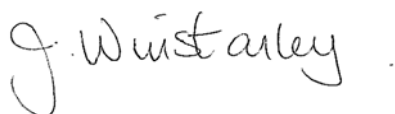
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ The maintenance and development of existing strengths, including high educational outcomes, whilst focusing and investing increasingly in areas of low performance. |
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Important weaknesses and areas for development

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

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Juliet Winstanley".

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager
Local Services Inspection