

26 November 2007

Mr J Christie
Director of Children and Families
London Borough of Brent
Chesterfield House
9 Park Lane
Wembley
HA9 7RW

Dear Mr Christie

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

This letter summarises the findings of the 2007 annual performance assessment for your local authority. The judgements in the letter draw on your review of the Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP), which incorporated your evaluation of progress on the issues raised in the report of the joint area review undertaken in 2006, and the evidence and briefings provided by Ofsted, other inspectorates and relevant bodies. 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.

Overall effectiveness of children's services

Grade 3

Brent Council delivers a good level of services for children and young people. Children's services make a good contribution to improving the achievement and well-being of children and young people in an area of considerable ethnic diversity with pockets of high social and economic deprivation. The council has made a significant improvement to its contribution to staying safe since the joint area review last year. In particular, effective partnership working and the focus on preventative services is having a positive impact.

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 aspect is good. Access to health care is good and the planned development of children's centres co-located with health services is a strength. The rate of annual health assessments for looked after children and young people has increased from 75% in 2005–06 to 88% for 2006–07 and is higher than the national rate and that for similar areas. The performance band has improved from good to very good. Health reviews of looked after children and young people have improved

substantially from 67% in 2005–06 to 90% in 2006–07. This is 1% lower than similar areas but 6% higher than the national rate.

Rates of teenage pregnancy have continued to fall but remain a target for multi-agency work to make further reductions, particularly within disadvantaged groups and ethnic minorities, as the overall rates remain high. The under 18 conception data show the quarterly average has been reducing and the most recent figure for March 2006 is now 8.2 points below the London average and 5.4 points below the England average. However, Brent has identified the need to do more.

During 2005, in the National Health Service Trust commissioned to serve the Brent area, all new non-specialist Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) cases and all specialist CAMHS cases were seen within 26 weeks. This is higher than in England as a whole for both types of cases. Although the proportion of non-specialist cases seen within four weeks is lower than the England average the specialist cases seen within four weeks is significantly higher. Plans for 24-hour, seven days a week CAMHS are well established and access to the service is good.

Joint funding and commissioning have led to a number of successful multi-agency projects, posts and developments. One good example is the development of the integrated services for children with a learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Area for development

- Continued multi-agency attention to reduce teenage pregnancy rates particularly within disadvantaged groups.

Staying safe

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improve outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is now good. In 2006, the joint area review judged staying safe as adequate. However, substantial investment in preventative and support services is having a positive impact in a number of the areas identified for improvement in the joint area review. The reviews of looked after children and young people now take place within timescales for 90% of cases, which is a substantial increase from 67% in 2005–06. This improvement is now in line with similar areas and national figures. A rapid response team provides an effective service to intervene quickly with vulnerable children and young people to help reduce the number that could become longer term cases. As a result, the number of looked after children and young people has reduced from 427 in June 2006 to 390 currently.

Appropriate child protection services are provided and these reflect the cultural diversity and needs of the area. Overall performance is good and demonstrates appropriate referral systems and thresholds. The number of children and young people who became the subject of a child protection plan in the last year was lower than similar areas and England as a whole. Re-registrations are lower than those in similar areas and England as a whole.

Referrals and child protection registrations have risen in line with the national increase, but the increase in referrals is partly due to the focus on preventative work and the early identification of vulnerable children and young people, as well as those at risk. All child protection cases are allocated to a qualified social worker and all conferences are held within timescales. In addition to this there has been good improvement in the completion of initial assessments within seven days. This is still lower than similar areas but in line with the national average. The Common Assessment Framework has been piloted and evaluated in two localities before being used across the borough. The indications are that referrals at the early preventative stage will continue to increase, but this will have a significant impact on reducing child protection and looked after children cases. Good systems are in place to ensure that the processes by which a referral can be directed to the appropriate services, including child protection, are closely monitored. Targeted work is successfully helping to create safer communities and an advisor is working with the faith communities, raising their awareness of safeguarding issues. The local safeguarding children's board is well managed, has clear objectives and monitors practice through appropriate sub-groups.

Adoption rates have improved and a second adoption team is in place so that the council can meet its target to further improve on this progress. Seven children have been placed in the last quarter and 19 are in the process of being placed. This is a good and significant increase. The number of looked after children and those placed outside of the borough continues to reduce following a careful review of what is best for the children involved. Local provision is being developed with an independent provider and the number of foster carers increased. This, linked to the fact that most placements are close to the borough, enables continued education and family links. Support for care leavers has also improved in partnership with the voluntary sector. Additional support and 35 semi-independent places have been created. There has been a decrease in the proportion of eligible children with a pathway plan but a good increase in those classified as former relevant children with a pathway plan.

Recording, monitoring and tracking of all reviews and initial and core assessments are effective. For example, reviewing officers identify and report any that do not meet timescales or expected quality. One of the joint area review recommendations related to improving services for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Consultation has taken place with service users and carers with good feedback on the plans to integrate the services and the action taken. The decision to implement a phased approach to the integration of services has been effective.

Reduction in road accidents continues to be a strength, the current number being lower than that reported in 2004. The decrease is greater than reported nationally in the same time period. The Tellus2 survey indicated that children and young people generally feel safe and well supported in the area. Their views reflect the substantial reduction in the overall crime rate.

Areas for development

- Continue to improve the rate of adoptions.
- Ensure that the referral process to the various services provision is clear and that the impact of refocusing on preventative services is monitored and evaluated.

Enjoying and achieving

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. Children get a sound start to their education in a range of early years settings. Most schools are effective in meeting learners' needs. Progress measures between key stages are generally above the national rate, particularly between Key Stages 2 and 4. Inspection evidence shows that children and young people generally enjoy school and work hard and this is endorsed by the results of the Tellus2 survey. The proportion of primary schools causing concern rose in the academic year 2005/2006 when two were judged to require special measures and one was given a notice to improve. These schools are now making satisfactory progress in addressing their weaknesses. Targeted support and advice from consultants is balanced effectively with a good level of challenge from other officers in the school improvement service. The policy for categorising and intervening in schools according to their performance is well defined with good use of programmes from the National Strategies.

Standards have been slow to rise in Key Stage 1 and remain below national figures in reading and mathematics. However, the focus on improving writing brought about a 3% rise in results in 2006. These are now close to the national figures and above those of similar authorities. Results at Key Stage 2 rose slightly in 2006 but, although results in English kept pace with national figures, results remain below the national figures in mathematics and science. Key Stage 3 results are rising steadily and are generally in line with the national picture. Of note is the good rise of 5% in science in 2006 to bring results in line with those nationally. GCSE results continue to rise at a rate that is faster than similar authorities and the national figures. The proportion of young people gaining five or more GCSEs at grades A*-C is above the national figure at 61.4%, with 48.9% achieving five or more A*-C grades that include English and mathematics. Raising the attainment of minority ethnic groups remains an area for development, specifically with regards to Black Caribbean and Somali children and young people. The gap between their achievement and that of other groups continues to narrow but at a slower rate than nationally. The council has successfully raised the proportion of looked after children that are entered for, and gaining success in, examinations, but has identified that more work is required to reach figures comparable with similar authorities. A dedicated team of teachers gives a range of individual and well targeted support to this group of children and young people including visiting those that are placed in schools out of the borough.

Recent inspections have judged the attitudes and behaviour of children and young people in schools as generally good. Attendance rates are improving in primary schools, although they remain slightly below average, and are good in secondary schools. The council has made significant improvements to its full time provision for children and young people permanently excluded from schools. This issue, identified by the joint area review, has been tackled rigorously with much success through reorganising the provision. The combined pupil referral unit and youth centre at Chalkhill is on target to open in April 2008. Despite a reduction in the last year, the rate of permanent exclusions from secondary schools remains too high. The Council's Behaviour & Attendance team supports targeted secondary schools in improving the behaviour and attendance of children and young people. Permanent exclusions of children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities has fallen markedly in secondary schools, but the proportion of primary pupils with statements of special need in mainstream schools who are subject to fixed-term exclusions has risen slightly.

Areas for development

- Improve the achievement of Black Caribbean and Somali children and young people.
- Reduce exclusion rates from schools.

Making a positive contribution

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. The council is committed to ensuring that children and young people have more opportunities to contribute in making decisions about the services provided in their local area. The youth parliament is relatively new but many schools have well established school councils. This is frequently identified as a strength in school inspections. Children and young people were generally positive in the Tellus2 survey about the services in the authority. A good proportion of looked after children and young people contribute effectively to their reviews. The council consistently meets the target of over 90% of young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities having a transition plan to support their move to adult services. Since the joint area review, the council has further developed its approach to the integration of services for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities through the work of multi-agency teams. Improvements in play provision for these children and young people have been secured through lottery funding and the council has increased its budget for direct payments.

At the time of the joint area review the youth service was judged to be making reasonable progress having previously been inadequate. Significant financial input in the last two years has enabled the council to increase staffing levels to improve the ratio of youth workers to young people and to refurbish and build new youth centres. Acknowledging that there is more to do to increase participation rates of young

people in activities, the council is developing an integrated, multi-agency, approach to youth services. Youth workers are undertaking outreach work at targeted schools to reduce anti-social behaviour at the beginning and end of the school day.

The youth offending service performs well and is being used as a model of good practice for other London authorities. The massive reduction in the number of first time offenders is indicative of the good preventative measures being put in place by the council and this is having a positive impact on their ability to gain employment. However, despite a general fall in the crime rate in the area, the proportion of those who re-offend is too high and this remains an area for development.

Areas for development

- Strengthen further the youth service to increase participation rates in activities.
- Reduce the number of young people who re-offend.

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. The council is making good progress in implementing its realistic and appropriate 14–19 strategy. Objectives, based on the findings of a self-assessment process, are reviewed regularly and actions have been prioritised in response to perceived needs. Well established collaborative arrangements, including those with external partners, offer cohesion between the providers of 14–19 education and training. Results are good at Level 2 and Level 3. National vocational qualification results for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are good. Participation rates are improving and children and young people completing the Tellus2 survey showed an ambition to gain qualifications by going on to further education. The proportion of young people aged 16 to 19 who are not in education, employment or training is falling. Figures compare well with other London authorities. The council recognises the need to improve its systems for tracking the progress and analysing the participation rates of Black and minority ethnic, and vulnerable groups. Investment into expanding provision for vocational training and Entry to Employment programmes is good. A high number of young offenders are gaining entry to employment. At 97.5 % this figure is better than that for all other London authorities.

The latest figures show a dramatic increase in the number of young people completing their apprenticeships. Nonetheless provision for work-based learning is narrow, with few training providers and considerable reliance on the College of North West London.

The council's priority to improve the availability of decent housing is reflected in the good reduction in the time that children and young people spend in bed and breakfast and hostel accommodation. Both figures have halved over the last two years but are still among the highest in the country. Invest and save funding has been used to provide better accommodation for looked after young people to help them make the transition into independent learning. This was an issue identified by the joint area review.

Provision for childcare places is growing faster than the national rate. An audit of parental views shows a need for flexible provision. The take up of provision is much higher than in other London authorities, enabling parents to return to employment or take up training opportunities. Brent is particularly successful in providing information to parents about the availability of places and in encouraging them to take up places under the Childcare Affordability Programme. Brent has secured 76% occupancy in flexible child care places against the London average of 47%, while the take up of full-time places at 54% is double the London average of 27%. The council is making reasonable progress in developing children's centres and, despite the capital slippage on five projects, services are expected to be operational by the target date of March 2008. Partnership planning for the development of children's centres has been strained by circumstances in the Primary Care Trust (PCT). Nonetheless, two children's centres will be located in hospitals.

Areas for development

- Widen the availability and breadth of opportunities for work-based learning.
- Strengthen systems for tracking the progress and analysing the participation rates of vulnerable children, young people and those from minority ethnic groups.

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

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for improvement

The council has good capacity to improve its services for children and young people. Management of these services is strong. Senior leadership is effective and corporate support for improving children's services provision is good. The review of the children and young people's plan, which included an update of action taken on the joint area review recommendations, shows that good and sustained progress is being made in all areas. The development of integrated services is a positive feature and the decision to establish them in five neighbourhoods that mirror the organisation of the PCT will further enhance the joint partnership working. Performance management and data has improved and substantial investment has enabled a focus on preventative and support services. Realignment of services is resulting in additional expenditure in some key areas and this is supported by the council. The employment

of temporary and agency staff has been considerably reduced with the appointment of permanent staff. Staff morale is high.

Effective corporate parenting and leadership is a strong feature of the council. Although there has been a change of political control since the publication of the original CYPP, the council remains committed to its six strategic priorities.

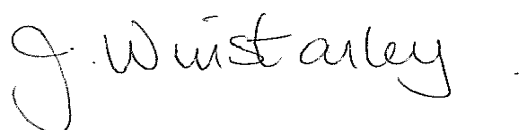
The key issue facing the council and its partners is the budget pressures on the PCT referred to previously. Currently the council is funding some of the services that would normally be funded by the PCT. In the longer term, budgetary pressures could affect the good quality services that have been established. Despite these current difficulties, the council and the PCT are working together proactively. The council and its partners are committed to retaining the focus on preventative services and are working with the PCT to this end.

Area for development

- Continue working with the PCT to minimise the impact of PCT budget reductions in children's services, ensuring preventative services are given a central focus.

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