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Mr Tony Eccleston
Director of Education, Children's Services and Libraries
Bracknell Forest Borough Council
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Dear Mr Eccleston

2007 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN BRACKNELL FOREST BOROUGH COUNCIL

This letter summarises the findings of the 2007 annual performance assessment for your local authority, some aspects of which were conducted at the same time as the analysis stage of the joint area review. The 2006 annual performance assessment informed the scoping of the joint area review at the planning stage and the initial findings of the 2007 annual performance assessment were taken into account by the joint area review team at the end of the analysis stage. The outcomes of the joint area review were then considered alongside a review of recent data in arriving at the final annual performance assessment judgements for 2007. As a result, many of the areas for development highlighted in this letter align with the recommendations in the joint area review report and should be similarly aligned in any future action plan produced by the council and its partners. The judgements in the letter also draw on your assessment of progress or review of the Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP) and the evidence and briefings provided by Ofsted and other inspectorates. We are grateful for the information you provided to support this and for the time given by you and your colleagues to the assessment process.

Overall effectiveness of children's services

Grade 3

Bracknell Forest's overall effectiveness is good. Children's services have made an increasingly good contribution to the lives and achievements of its children and young people. The voice of those children and young people is carefully listened to and is utilised effectively in local decision-making processes and in strategic planning. The drive to improve provision for those children and young people in care and those who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities is effectively prioritised in the CYPP. The authority is striving to take the needs of a rapidly increasing number of children and young people from families newly arrived from Eastern Europe into account. The contribution of the local authority to the health of children and young people in the

borough is outstanding and the children feel safe in the local area with significant preventative measures in place. Pre-school provision is good and achievement in both primary and secondary schools is good overall. The local authority provides effective support and challenge for schools and the only secondary school judged to require a notice to improve has shown appropriate progress. The involvement of many young people in the UNICEF Rights Agenda reflects the local authority's clear commitment to community involvement and ensures that children and young people make a positive contribution as they grow up.

The confidence of officers to work across teams and in close partnership is palpable, which has raised expectations and outcomes for most children and young people. Performance management continues to be highly regarded and as such has been adopted by all Bracknell Forest partnerships as best practice.

Being healthy

Grade 4

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children in this respect continues to be outstanding. The area requiring development in last year's annual performance assessment has been successfully addressed.

The health of young people in Bracknell Forest is good with low levels of child mortality and good performance on immunisations and dental health. Significantly fewer children are born with a low birth weight than either Bracknell Forest's statistical neighbours or the national average and higher than average number of babies are breast-fed.

Programmes to reduce smoking during pregnancy have had an impact on smoking behaviour and the level of smoking is now in line with national performance. Teenage pregnancy levels continue to decline sharply and the authority has been judged as one of the top three local authorities in the country. A fall of 40.6% in conceptions has occurred since base line data was introduced in 1998.

A well-coordinated approach to healthy lifestyles exists, reflecting a whole family approach. The outcomes from child care registration and inspection are particularly impressive in relation to being healthy and exceed those of statistical neighbours and the national picture. All schools are signed-up to the Healthy Schools Programme and progress indicates they are likely to achieve ambitious targets and already exceed national targets. The carefully thought through incremental development of Children's Centres has ensured a common and shared practice across all professionals and agencies involved. This is beginning to provide very effective models of accessible support, focussing on the needs of families. The development of drop-in clinics for services such as speech therapy provides a prompt and accessible advice service for families. An obesity strategy is being developed and good progress has been made on participation in physical activity. All schools have a drugs policy and young people can access a specialist substance misuse service.

The implementation of the child and adolescent mental health strategy is having a good impact, with a significantly reduced rate of referrals to specialist Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. Integrated Care Pathways for primary and secondary age children are in place and are in development for 16- and 17-year-olds. There is a widening range of preventative support projects and a programme of training for other professionals.

Overall performance on health assessments of looked after children and young people is good, and work is in progress to address the needs of those who refuse to cooperate with health assessments, the lack of immunisation history and the recent decline in dental assessments. A drug-use assessment tool has also recently been introduced.

Area for development

- Seek to gain the co-operation of the children and young people in care who choose not to cooperate with health assessments.

Staying safe

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the authority to improving outcomes for children in this respect is good. There is a strong commitment to making the borough a safe place for children; traffic accidents are low and there are good levels of safety in schools and in pre-school settings. The Local Safeguarding Board provides effective multi-agency direction and oversight through its business plan.

A multi-agency domestic violence strategy is in place, which includes preventative work with young people, in particular with young men. All schools have anti-bullying strategies in place and the authority has recently put additional resources into challenging bullying across the borough, following a significant consultation exercise with young people in 2006. The impact of these initiatives to combat bullying appear to be satisfactory at this stage.

Referral rates to children's social care teams are low but a high percentage of these referrals result in an initial assessment, showing that other agencies have a clear understanding of the thresholds for social work intervention. There is no evidence that the lower than average referral rate is indicative of unacceptably high thresholds for intervention. Re-referral rates for children and young people in need are low, demonstrating that interventions are having an impact and that other agencies are continuing to support children and young people when social work involvement ceases. Whilst slightly fewer initial assessments are completed on time than in previous years, performance remains good and considerably better than the local authority's statistical neighbours and the national average. The authority completes fewer core assessments proportionally than other authorities, but there is no evidence that this is affecting children and young people through higher incidents of

child protection or family breakdown. Timescales for completion of core assessments are good.

The numbers of children and young people who are placed on the Child Protection Register are low in comparison with similar authorities and there are low levels of re-registrations. The interventions made are effective in achieving improved outcomes for children and young people. There is no evidence to show that the low numbers on the register is indicative of unacceptably high thresholds for registration. All children and young people on the Child Protection Register have an allocated worker and all reviews are completed on time.

The numbers of looked after children and young people in Bracknell Forest are low in comparison with similar authorities and all have an allocated social worker. A significant percentage of these also have complex statements of educational need and many are adolescents. The proportion of looked after children and young people from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds has remained constant over the last two years. The number of carers taking up direct payment for short break care has increased from three to fifteen during 2006-2007. Effective use is made of residence allowances and special guardianship orders to enable extended family members to care for children as an alternative to becoming looked after. A higher than average number of looked after children and young people are placed in residential care, many in residential schools, either full time or as weekly boarders. Whilst this is a high percentage, it is a product of the complex educational and care needs of many of the looked after children and young people. The local authority acknowledges that there is a need to increase the number of fostering placements for children and young people with complex needs, for adolescents and for respite care for disabled children and young people. Whilst placement stability is good for those who remain in a placement for more than a year, in the last year there has been an increase in the number of children and young people who experience three or more placements in a year. There is a process in place to analyse the reasons for this increase, which is informing future recruitment and placement planning.

The timeliness of reviews for those looked after children and young people is acceptable but the level of participation of young people in their reviews continues to be below the national average despite efforts to promote participation by young people with communication difficulties.

Areas for development

- Increase the number of looked after children and young people who participate in their reviews and improve their long-term placement stability.
- Increase the number of foster care placements for adolescents and children with complex needs.

Enjoying and achieving

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. In 2006, at the end of Years 2, 6 and 11 there was an upward trend in attainment, making the local authority one of the most improved in the country. Only one secondary school was judged to require a notice to improve and swift action by the local authority together with effective officer support has had a positive impact. This school has recently been re-inspected with an encouraging outcome. Effective and appropriate procedures exist to support, challenge and intervene in schools where necessary. For example, as a result of support, primary schools which had failed to meet floor targets in mathematics have improved. However, three new schools fell below the floor targets in mathematics. All schools are above the floor targets in English.

Pre-school provision continues to be good, with no actions being required following registration. This was better than Bracknell Forest's statistical neighbours and national outcomes. Overall, judgements for child care provision exceeded the national average and no settings were judged inadequate in follow up inspections, crèches being particularly good. The proportion of settings judged good in the area of enjoying and achieving in education was well above the national average.

Primary school inspections indicate that a very high percentage were good or better in their overall effectiveness. The Foundation Stage was judged good in almost all inspections and none were inadequate. Foundation Stage moderation was secure with profile assessments showing improvement in all six areas of learning. Notable improvements were in the areas of mathematical development and communication, language and literacy.

Attainment in reading and writing at the end of Year 2 was in line with statistical neighbours and above the national average, with girls out performing boys in reading, writing and mathematics. Mathematics attainment in 2006 was above statistical neighbours and the national average, with a significant number of boys reaching the higher levels. There has been a rapid increase in the number of pupils from minority ethnic groups; many of these, including Black Caribbean children, achieved well, and above Bracknell Forest averages. A termly audit of English language skills, supported by the highly effective 'English as an Additional Language and Diversity' team ensures that schools can effectively develop the language skills of those recently arrived to this country.

In Key Stage 2 the percentage of pupils achieving at least level 4 in English, mathematics and science improved in 2006. Results at Key Stage 2 were above the national average in 2006 and have been so for many years. Pupils from minority ethnic groups generally fared well, except for the Asian-other group who achieved a lower average point score.

Key Stage 3 attainment in 2006 showed an all round improvement on 2005, with the gender gap closing in science and mathematics. In English, results for boys as well as girls were above the national average but the difference between them was significant. Analysis shows that pupils from different minority ethnic groups, albeit very small in number, did not generally attain as highly as White pupils. Pupils in care had variable results; those with a statement of educational need were often in special school settings and working below the level of the tests, whilst a number of others in mainstream schools reached age-appropriate results.

Results in GCSE improved in 2006 for both boys and girls in English and mathematics and for boys in science. The percentage of pupils gaining five or more A*-C grades overall, and five or more A*-C grades including English and mathematics increased in 2006 and both sets of results were above the national average. The local authority set realistic targets for the achievement of looked after children and young people.

The recent development of learning support units in secondary schools is improving the chances of pupils achieving targeted examination success and remaining in school, this is being closely monitored by the local authority. The rate of permanent exclusion continued to decline but fixed term exclusions increased. The authority believes this was a short-term issue and occurred due to the adoption of a particular policy by one secondary school, which has subsequently changed. Attendance in primary schools was in line with statistical neighbours and above the national average. In secondary schools, attendance was in line with statistical neighbours and national averages. The attendance of looked after children and young people has improved steadily since 2004 and is now acceptable. Appropriate strategies are in place to support schools to improve attendance and reduced further exclusions.

Areas for development

- Improve further the standards in boys' attainment, especially in writing and English in Key Stages 2 and 3.
- Reduce fixed term exclusions in the secondary sector.

Making a positive contribution

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

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

The council is committed to encouraging children, young people and their families to be actively involved in decision-making and to help shape the provision of services in the area. The target of fifty young people using the Millennium Volunteer Scheme set by the Government Office for the South East has been achieved and exceeded. A website 'Xpresionz' has been developed and launched by young people, and a young people's page in the borough's quarterly newsletter is produced and edited by them. These all contribute well to listening to young people's voices and encourage their

participation in decision-making. The local authority recognises, however, that there is still more to do to widen participation still further.

School inspections report positively across the primary and secondary school sectors in this area and the schools' considerable involvement in the UNICEF Rights Agenda reflects the clear commitment to community involvement and children and young people making a positive contribution.

Provision of a range of school extra curricular activity is promoted through eight locally developed area plans and the extended schools programme is beginning to be rolled out. The borough has met its first target of 16% of schools providing or making access to five core services before or after normal school hours and in the school holidays. The personal education plans of looked after children and young people now have a specific section dedicated to out-of-school-hours learning, enabling them to participate fully in opportunities provided in the borough.

An Early Interventions Project funded by the Children's Fund, based within the Youth Offending Service has continued to provide a preventative service to young people who are at risk of offending. The Youth Offending Team's target to reduce first offender numbers has been achieved with approximately 22% reduction. However, the number of looked after children aged ten or over receiving final warnings, reprimands and convictions remains proportionately above Bracknell Forest's statistical neighbours and above the national average but the numbers involved are low and the proportion has reduced slightly during the period 2006-2007.

Area for development

- Reduce further the number of warnings, reprimands and convictions of looked after children and young people.

Achieving economic well-being

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

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

Ofsted inspections in 2006 judged all secondary schools to be satisfactory or better in relation to economic well-being. Although the number of schools inspected was small, a disproportionate negative effect was felt by the school given a notice to improve. The attainment in the core skills of English, mathematics, science and information and communication technology supports pupils and young people effectively in achieving economic well-being. Those pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds and those looked after also achieve well in relation to their potential economic well-being.

The proportion of young people who remain in full time education either in school or in college increased slightly from 2004 to 2006 but a significantly larger percentage have continued in learning from 2006 to date. However, the drop-out rate from the

college is too high. The figure for those not in education, employment and training fluctuates during reporting periods; it is above that of Bracknell Forest's statistical neighbours.

The proportion of young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in work based learning opportunities at almost 20%, is very good and higher than the national average. The latest figure for the number of young people completing an apprenticeship is 90%; this is well above both statistical neighbours and the national percentage. Both of these indicators represent a significantly positive picture. Persuading job centres to support the most vulnerable young people who are not in education, employment or training has been problematic. However, the Connexions service is providing good support for the most vulnerable young people and is effective in tracking their progress towards education, employment or training. The most recent figure for the percentage of care leavers who are living in suitable accommodation is a little higher than statistical neighbours and the national average.

A reformed 14–19 partnership group has recently been initiated, which will develop a plan for 2008–2013. The previous 14–19 strategy group was slow to bring about change in the joint working between schools and local colleges, whilst the range of information provided for young people on which to base their post-16 decisions was under-developed. The recently reformed partnership group will consider fully the new diplomas alongside the 'building schools for the future' initiative due to commence in 2010. This, in conjunction with decisions about schools' specialist status, will enable much needed new energy and impetus to be brought to bear on 14–19 education in the borough, particularly in the post 16 age group. A draft project plan has now been drawn up to decide on an appropriate strategy to be taken. An independent chair has been appointed and the Chief Executive is a member of the group. It is clearly too early to have made any impact.

All secondary schools in Bracknell Forest agreed to joint courses and common timetables for Level 2 courses; these have been in place for the last three years. Plans have been agreed for joint Level 3 courses, which commence in 2007, embracing three schools and the further education college. The borough has commissioned work with the local learning and skills council to look at possible provision in the south of the borough and consultation is in place to consider how best to extend this. The post 16 partnership has produced a Level 2 prospectus for the last two years alongside an on-line Berkshire prospectus, which the partnership recognises is still in need of further development.

Areas for development

- Ensure that increased joint provision of both Level 2 and Level 3 courses across schools and colleges in the region has sufficient drive and commitment to succeed.
- Bring the overall numbers of young people not in education, employment and training down to the level of statistical neighbours.

Capacity to improve, including the management of services for children and young people

Grade 3

The CYPP has focused energy effectively on agreed priority areas for improvement. This has followed a thorough review of the initial CYPP. The impact of this approach is evidenced in significantly improved outcomes for children and young people in a number of areas and is mapped closely to align with the medium term objectives for the council 2008–2011.

Against a very tight financial budget, the council manages its service to children and young people very well. Funds are re-allocated within existing budgets to achieve very good value for money in meeting key priorities. The children's services directorate is well led and senior officers have a clear sense of direction from his effective leadership. The key areas for development are well known and understood. Prioritisation has been based on thorough and rigorous analysis of need, although more up to date local detail is needed as the population is changing rapidly. The phasing of extended services and the development of children's centres has ensured excellent capitalisation of professional expertise. Succession planning for staff leaving and joining the service in various teams is exemplary. External sources of funding are vigorously sought and fully utilised to support CYPP priorities. Good progress has been made in many areas since the previous annual performance assessment.


The effectiveness of the local authority is reflected in its positive impact on school improvement, anti-bullying programmes, the engagement of children and young people in decision-making, the work of the youth offending service and the English as an additional language and diversity team. The strengths of the various partnerships that now exist provide considerable confidence in building further capacity. However, although the reformed 14–19 partnership group has begun its work, progress to date has been slow, particularly for the post-16 age group. Good support is offered by elected members as evidenced in the primary and adolescent centres, early years and child care provision and the Local Safeguarding Children board.

Area for development

- Ensure that the 14–19 partnership rapidly develops its strategy and takes prompt and decisive action.

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 "Juliet Winstanley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a period at the end.

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager
Local Services Inspection