

26 November 2007

Mrs Margaret Asquith
Director of Children's Services
Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council
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Dear Mrs Asquith

2007 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN BOLTON METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

This letter summarises the findings of the 2007 annual performance assessment (APA) 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 APA informed the scoping of the joint area review at the planning stage and the initial findings of the 2007 APA were taken into account by the 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 APA 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 where it was available, 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

The council consistently delivers services for children and young people at a good level, although in one aspect an adequate contribution is made by services towards improving outcomes. The council recognises the need for further improvement in attainment at Key Stages 3 and 4, building upon the sustained improvement achieved in recent years. Children's services has continued to build upon the strengths noted in last year's APA, and has tackled, or is tackling, all the identified areas for improvement. Further progress has been made in developing opportunities

for young people aged 14–19 where strong strategic planning and collaborative partnerships are having an impact. Partnership with other agencies and appropriate needs analysis have remained strong. Overall capacity for improvement is good.

Being healthy

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. Relationships, and joint working arrangements, with the Primary Care Trust (PCT) are strong and are exemplified by two joint appointments in public health. There is a high degree of participation of schools in the healthy schools programme and plans outlined in last year's assessment for total involvement of all schools are virtually complete. An innovative young people's health centre, the Parallel, has been developed which provides a child-friendly environment and targets those young people who are reluctant to be involved in mainstream services.

The possible sexual exploitation of young people is closely monitored through a network of intelligence gathering coordinated through a local centre for working women. The network includes a project designed to prevent young people going missing from care and to track those who do; this links into Project 360, a nationally regarded substance misuse project in the town. The network ensures that vulnerable young people on the periphery of substance misuse, or prostitution, are identified quickly and appropriately safeguarded. Regular reporting of activity is made to the Local Safeguarding Children Board and Community Safety Partnership.

Teenage pregnancy action plans have been commended by the regional teenage pregnancy coordinator for Government Office North West. However, teenage conception rates are declining at a very slow rate. The council is confident that a sustained approach, as outlined in its plans, will succeed in lowering rates in the longer term. Substantial investment has been made in sex and relationships education and a variety of initiatives have been developed to meet the previous criticisms from young people about this part of the curriculum. Specialist staff have been deployed to support teachers in delivering the programme and a theatre company has been used to enhance its impact.

Childhood obesity has been highlighted as a priority for the council. Recently, 68% of children and young people in schools were surveyed about this issue. As a result, free leisure and swimming passes are to be made available to all children and young people. The health of looked after children and young people continues to be a prime concern for the council. The appointment of a senior nurse, jointly funded by the local authority and the PCT, has helped improve the council's performance in arranging annual health and dental checks which remains very good. A voucher scheme to enable foster carers and looked after children and young people to access the dentist of their choice anywhere in the town has recently been agreed with local dental practices.

Area for development

- Lower teenage conception rates more rapidly.

Staying safe

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 has built on the good performance reported last year with considerable improvements in some aspects of its performance. However, some issues remain problematic. High numbers of children and young people placed at home on care orders, and the number of cases which result in re-referrals, continue to require attention.

Excellent partnership working arrangements exist across the local authority and its partners. All council departments are working together to improve the life chances of looked after children. Chief officers meet together regularly to assess the needs of children in the looked after system and how best the council, as a whole, can respond. This focus has led to the development of a mentoring scheme for looked after children which is being piloted using local voluntary sector partners.

The family support service has historically been strong but has been restructured over the last year to cater for young people 0-19 in order to provide a more flexible approach to prevent family breakdown. The local authority is in the process of commissioning a voluntary sector partner to provide a maintenance service to families following child protection or looked after interventions in order to prevent the risks of future family breakdown. All three indicators for child protection show signs of improvement. The registration rate of children on the child protection register has declined to 24%, which is substantially below the council's statistical neighbours and represents good performance. The most recent data for 2006/07 indicate good performance in completing core assessments in social care cases. All children on the child protection register have an allocated social worker and 99.6% of looked after children are allocated a qualified social worker. The stability of placements for looked after children, and the numbers of reviews completed on time, both show considerable improvement and good performance. There is a lack of suitable placement arrangements for those young people who are either remanded to care, or require looking after, under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act.

A study of the referral system has been carried out by the council which revealed inappropriate counting of referrals. Since the system has been modified the number of referrals has dropped considerably; however, the subsequent re-referral rates remain high. The number of looked after children and young people remains unstable. A significant drop, reported earlier in the year, was followed by a subsequent surge, which means numbers remain above the national average for all English authorities, although the level continues to remain below that of statistical neighbouring authorities. The use of independent fostering agencies has been

reduced partly due to the successful recruitment of 15 carers over the period since the last assessment. A rigorous recruitment campaign for foster carers is continuing.

The under-representation of Black and minority ethnic children and young people in the child protection and looked after system has been a focus for the council and shows signs of improvement. Problems of recording ethnicity appropriately have been tackled and, whilst an under representation continues, overall, the council performance has risen to 0.7 in the looked after system, which represents a considerable improvement.

A draft accident prevention strategy has been completed but has yet to be implemented across agencies. The Local Safeguarding Children Board are leading on its implementation. Safety initiatives are already in place, however, and the crucial crew initiative has been very successful. The police and other emergency services visit schools together to provide an integrated view of the dangers faced by children and young people and the safety measures necessary to minimise those dangers.

The numbers of looked after children and young people placed at home has been a focus for targeted action by the council since the last assessment. Liaison with the Child and Family Court Advisory Service and the judiciary locally has taken place. Whilst the overall numbers of children and young people in home placements show signs of improvement, performance is significantly below that of comparator authorities.

Areas for development

- Reduce the high numbers of children and young people placed at home on care orders.
- Develop suitable arrangements for young people on remand.

Enjoying and achieving

Grade 2

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 adequate. Within this there are a number of strengths. Early years settings contribute well to good outcomes for the children and young people who attend; standards of childcare are in line with the national average. Well-considered steps are being taken to ensure that applicants for childminding are suitably prepared for the role.

Standards and achievement at Key Stages 1 and 2 are steadily in line both with performance in similar areas and national averages. The attainment of pupils of Pakistani heritage has improved and is now better in all core subjects at the end of Key Stage 2 than found nationally for this group. The overall effectiveness of primary schools inspected in the last year was at least satisfactory and good in just over half of those evaluated. The progress of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities was judged to be good in the majority of primary schools.

Overall, pupils' rate of achievement at Key Stages 3 and 4 remains lower than the national average. Nonetheless, in 2006 there was a rise in test results at Key Stage 3. This was significant in mathematics and science, restoring performance to the national average. In 2007, results in English showed a 3% rise, which is a faster rate of increase than the national average and sustains a four-year rising trend in English attainment. The proportion of pupils gaining five good GCSE passes at the end of Key Stage 4 increased for the third year running in 2007 to 56%. Schools that were the focus of school improvement measures did particularly well. There are no schools below the floor target. However, in a significant number of schools the percentage of pupils who did not gain a GCSE A*-C in English and mathematics was high. In 2006, Pakistani heritage pupils performed less well than their counterparts nationally at both Key Stages 3 and 4. Following additional targeted activity, Key Stage 3 results in English and mathematics improved in 2007. At Key Stage 4, the percentage of Pakistani heritage pupils gaining five A*-C GCSEs increased from 29% to 44%. There has been a significant improvement in the proportion of looked after children and young people being entered for at least one GCSE and gaining at least one pass. However, numbers with five GCSE A*-G passes remain below the national average. The majority of secondary schools inspected in the last year are judged to be satisfactory. Pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make satisfactory progress.

Attendance in both the primary and secondary phases is consistently in line with the national average. The numbers of looked after children absent from school is higher than both the national average and that of statistical neighbours. Inspections of primary schools this year found pupils' personal development and well-being to be at least good and often outstanding; it is good in the majority of secondary schools. The standard of pupils' behaviour and their enjoyment of learning are notable strengths. This is also reflected in the Tellus2 survey where 62% of pupils said that they always, or most of the time, enjoyed school, 4% above the national average. Permanent exclusions have fallen markedly and are in line with the national average. However, fixed-term exclusions remain above the national rate. Alternative provision is varied and flexible, reflecting the range of pupils' needs and, in some cases, allowing for early intervention. In addition, on-line learning helps to maintain engagement in formal education for a number of children and young people.

The authority has a robust system for monitoring schools and maintains a keen focus through training and challenge on areas where capacity requires strengthening. Support for the small number of schools causing concern is well targeted and effective.

Many pupils take up the wide-ranging opportunities to achieve and enjoy offered by the music service, both within and beyond the curriculum. Through sustained good links with the Octagon Theatre, children and young people participate in a variety of enriching activities. For instance, disabled children and young people who are members of Bridges worked on every stage of the production of a film about their dreams and aspirations. Other recreational opportunities are offered, such as well-tailored holiday programmes for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Areas for development

- Improve further pupils' achievement at Key Stages 3 and 4.
- Improve the number of pupils whose GCSE include A*-C in English and mathematics.
- Raise further the attainment of looked after children and young people especially the percentage gaining five GCSE A*-G.

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 quality of, and response to, consultations with children and young people are strengths across a range of services. Increasingly, children and young people are playing a part in the recruitment and selection of staff both to senior central posts, such as the Director of Children's Services, and more frequently to posts that have an immediate impact on their lives. For instance, following training, young people have participated in the appointments of foster care workers and staff at the Bolton Lads and Girls Club. Through the cash panels young people, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, are directly involved in evaluating project bids and allocating funding from the Youth Opportunities Fund and Youth Capital grants. Bolton's youth MPs play a key role as they continue to give children and young people a clear voice. In addition, a high proportion of looked after children and young people, and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, participate in their reviews and contribute to their transition plans.

A survey of young people accessing the youth service revealed a very high level of satisfaction with the activities offered. The service met its targets for recorded outcomes and exceeded that for accredited outcomes. However, although the percentage of young people between 13 and 19 years old it reaches has risen, this remains below average. An increasing number of children participating in activities through the play service are gaining both recorded and accredited outcomes linked to a volunteer programme. A number of mentoring schemes focus on the needs of vulnerable young people. For instance, through the Bolton Lads and Girls Club, super mentors liaise with a range of agencies and services to offer effective support to a number of young people at risk.

The council has been awarded beacon status for good practice with regard to community safety and juvenile nuisance. In targeted areas across the authority there has been a reduction in youth crime and the fear of crime. The Bolton Be Safe Partnership has gained beacon status for progress in dealing with juvenile crime; re-offending rates are well below those nationally and statistical neighbours. Final warnings, reprimands and convictions for looked after children and young people are

also well below the national figure. Nonetheless, the number of first time entrants to the criminal justice system has risen.

Area for development

- Reduce the number of young people entering the criminal justice system for the first time.

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. The council has established a comprehensive and coherent 14–19 strategy and excellent working partnerships with schools, colleges, work-based learning providers, employers and the Greater Manchester Learning and Skills Council. A strong culture of collaboration has been established. The Governance Forum provides an effective context for key stakeholders to discuss common issues. The involvement of work-based learning providers is a strength. Working through four geographical cluster groups, a thorough analysis of educational and skills requirements has been undertaken. Priorities have been clearly identified and action planning is comprehensive and appropriate. The strategy is now demonstrating some impact. A new 14–19 complex is presently under construction in South Bolton and will enable shared and collaborative provision by the colleges, schools and work-based learning providers. Clusters have enabled a consistent approach across an area in identifying and tackling needs including transportation, funding flows and the welfare of learners.

The percentage of young people achieving Level 2 and Level 3 by age 19 is just below the national average but ahead of statistical neighbours. In both categories, there has been sustained improvement over a three year period. School sixth forms range from good to satisfactory. Success rates within the two post-16 colleges demonstrate consistent improvements over the last two years. Performance at GCE AS and A-level has continued to improve over the last three years. The Advanced Level Performance System rates performance at the sixth form college in both GCE AS and A-level as excellent. Special school provision for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities aged 16 and over is a strength. An extensive range of practical and applied options are available within a broad 14–19 curriculum offer. The percentage of young people completing an apprenticeship has improved significantly. Apprenticeship frameworks have risen consistently over the last three years to above the national average. The Young Apprenticeship programme has, for example, in excess of 50 work placements across child care, health and social care. Apprenticeship programmes have been developed for health and care, motor vehicles, hair and beauty, and retail. Three specialist diplomas will be established in 2008 and a further two in 2009.

Colleges and schools operate an extensive 14–16 programme with good progression rates to further education. Children and young people receive early advice and

guidance about careers development. Progress has been made in developing the 14–19 prospectus; however, there are no common application procedures. Learning opportunities are available for vulnerable groups. The Teenage Pregnancy Unit offers learning opportunities in several vocational areas and currently has over 40 young mothers on Level 1 and 2 courses. Teenage parents have good access to post-16 learning through dedicated nursery provision. Retention rates for this group have improved significantly.

A high proportion of young people are not in education, employment or training and this is currently running at 11.3%. The percentage of looked after children and young people, and care leavers in this category, is above the national average. The council is aware of these issues and, with partners, has produced a comprehensive needs analysis and action plan. A good range of initiatives have been developed for those aged 11-16 to tackle those at risk of not engaging in education, training or employment. Already some improvements have occurred, including the tracking of unknowns and the identification of geographical areas and vulnerable groups most at risk. Bolton Community College provides good Education to Employment provision with high progression rates. There has been good progress in meeting the September guarantee for education, employment or training places for young people.

Areas for development

- Reduce the proportion of children and young people not engaged in education, employment or training.
- Progress towards an area-wide common applications procedure in the 14–19 prospectus.

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

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The vision outlined in *Every child matters* in the Bolton Family: Children and Young People's Plan 2007/10 is strongly shared and supported across the council. The children's services directorate has strong leadership and well-focused strategic management. The Children and Young People's Plan sets out a clear vision for the future. Management are aware of the structural changes needed to strengthen the further integration of services in line with the *Every child matters* agenda. New management structures have been designed to link fully all aspects of *Every child matters* into, and across, the work of the directorate. The management of inclusion is a strength. Good leadership of school improvement has sharpened the focus on underperforming schools. There is a strong willingness to embrace and move on innovation. Management performance systems are robust.

There is very good partnership working which impacts on services. There are excellent partnership arrangements within the 14–19 strategy which impact on the

quality of services and attainment levels. Relationships and joint working arrangements with the Primary Care Trust are strong. Understanding and meeting the needs of local communities has been enhanced through the development of geographical cluster groups; for example, through the Building Schools for the Future initiative, the development of academy plans, and the implementation of a robust 14–19 local strategy. There has been rapid structural progress with the Children's Trust. The use and sharing of data and needs analysis with partners and stakeholders have sharpened key priority objectives. There has been good progress in the youth service in managing information to support planning and delivery. A strong workforce development strategy has enabled staff to contribute more effectively to the development of services. Consultation with partners, local communities and children and young people is embedded in the directorate's work and approach to the management and improvement of services. Total education revenue expenditure is below the national average although higher for pupil referral units and behaviour support.

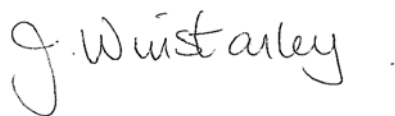
Overall, the council has a good capacity to make further improvements to its services for children and young people.

Areas for development

- Embed the structural changes to management and services to strengthen the integration of the *Every child matters* agenda.

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".

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager
Local Services Inspection