

26 November 2007

Dr D Absalom
Director of Children's & Young People's Services
London Borough of Bexley Council
Hillview
Welling
Kent
DA16 3RY

Dear Dr Absalom

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

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, your action plan arising from the joint area review and the evidence and briefings provided by Ofsted, other inspectorates and relevant bodies. The letter comments on progress since the recent joint area review. 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

Bexley Council consistently delivers above minimum requirements and continues to make a good contribution to improving outcomes for children and young people in most service functions across the five outcome areas. It makes an outstanding contribution towards supporting children and young people to be healthy. Its contribution to staying safe, making a positive contribution and achieving economic well-being is good. Outcomes for enjoying and achieving were adequate at the time of the joint area review and remain so, although there is clear evidence of improvement in some areas, including the raising of standards in mathematics and science at Key Stage 2 and reducing the number of schools in a category of concern. Overall capacity to improve continues to be good with a strong commitment to improving outcomes for children and young people in Bexley.

Being healthy

Grade 4

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 outstanding. No recommendations emerged from the joint area review.

Partnership working continues to be strong at both strategic and operational levels. Health outcomes meet most national targets. Immunisation rates are improving although these require attention in some areas, which is being addressed. While infant mortality rates have increased the numbers are small and are currently under investigation to focus specific areas for intervention. Therapy services have been redesigned and this has reduced the waiting lists for most children and young people. Access to sexual health services is very good across the borough and well integrated with the youth service. This has contributed to the falling rate of teenage pregnancies.

There is a strong focus on promoting health in the authority's schools and the development of co-located, integrated services. Schools are well engaged in the achievement of Healthy School's standards. Four Children Centres now operate in the borough and a fifth is due to open shortly providing effective support on family health matters in the most deprived areas of Bexley.

Agencies are working well to promote mental health and reduce substance misuse. There is very good access to a full range of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, and assessments of vulnerable children and young people are completed on time. Twenty-Four hour cover is now provided for specialist mental health assessments with a protocol in place and fully operational. Substance misuse services are strong and effective. The substance misuse awareness training tool continues to be promoted across all agencies.

The needs of vulnerable children and young people, including those who are looked after, are well met. Annual health assessments are carried out for the majority of children and young people, with performance above national levels.

Children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities benefit from excellent multi-agency team support. A dedicated nurse provides effective targeted support to children and young people with learning difficulties who have complex needs.

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. Two recommendations emerged from the joint area review.

For action in the next six months

- With its partners, evaluate the impact of projects to combat racism and ensure that schools and educational settings improve the reporting of racist incidents.

- Ensure consistency in the quality of social work practice by improving the quality of report writing for child protection conferences and reviews of looked after children and young people.

The council has made good progress in working with its schools to develop policies for combating racism and improving the reporting of incidents, including the use of a common format and procedure. In 2006—07 the number of incidents reported fell by a third and the new system, including a checklist for action introduced this year, has improved the level of reporting by schools. New developments include work on the introduction of guidance on cyber-bullying. Strategic oversight has been strengthened through the establishment of a Combating Harassment and Bullying Group, which replaces the former action group with a wider remit and is now a sub group of the Local Safeguarding Children Board. Targeted work is being progressed, with the police and community safety partnership, to address the issues of racism and bullying.

The council is working well to improve the consistency of social work practice and the quality of report writing. Guidance has been re-issued, which sets out minimum requirements together with targeted action through the secondment of a social care manager to ensure that front line social workers review current practice. Independent reviewing officers report directly to the relevant Head of Service if reports produced by social workers fall short of the required standard. The council has commissioned training for social workers in relation to risk assessment and recording, which has just commenced. File audits of practice have been undertaken by managers across agencies, with the involvement of looked after children and young people where appropriate.

Since the joint area review, outcomes for children and young people in staying safe remain good overall. The council has worked well with partners to improve community and personal safety in the borough. This includes effective multi-agency work with the victims of domestic violence.

Referrals of children in need have decreased but remain above the national average. The numbers of referrals which lead to initial and core assessments being carried out have fallen and are low compared to national levels, which through audit the local authority attributes to data collection issues currently being looked into. However, re-referrals have been successfully reduced. Children and young people most at risk from abuse are well protected by good professional practice and inter-agency collaboration. The number of children and young people on the Child Protection Register has fallen to below national levels as a result of early intervention and effective preventative work in schools. Child protection procedures are implemented and practice is managed and audited effectively. All children and young people on the Child Protection Register and those who are looked after have an allocated social worker and reviews are carried out on time. Re-registration rates are below national levels due to improved planning and quality assurance processes; de-registration rates are good compared to the national average. More initial assessments are carried out in a timely way although performance on core assessments while acceptable is below the national average.

The Local Safeguarding Children Board has been successfully established with full endorsement from all partner agencies. Compliance with the new safer recruitment guidance has been successfully promoted through a well attended, multi-agency conference and independent audit commissioned by the Local Safeguarding Children Board. Implementation of the common assessment framework is progressing well. All core professionals have been trained. Support provided by a dedicated coordinator and lead professional in each agency is helping to develop staff capacity to implement procedures.

The proportion of children and young people who are looked after continues to reduce and is below national levels as a result of good preventative measures and services. The stability of placements for children and young people who experience three or more moves during the year is good and similar to national levels, although better placement stability is required in the longer term because performance is below national comparators. Most children and young people are placed in fostering or adoptive placements, although the number placed with family and friends has fallen and the adoption rate is comparatively low. The recruitment of foster parents from Black and minority communities has improved increasing placement suitability and choice.

The council is making good progress to enable children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to live in safe environments and make a smooth transition to adult services. The percentage of children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities who have transition plans in place has increased to over 90% with quality assured by a multi-agency panel.

Areas for development

- Improve systems for recording response to referrals of children in need to inform future planning.
- Improve long term placement stability for looked after children and young people.
- Improve adoption rates.

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. Two recommendations emerged from the joint area review.

For action in the next six months

- Continue to work with schools to raise standards at Key Stage 2, particularly in mathematics and science.
- Work with schools to implement the agreed strategies to improve attendance and behaviour, reduce exclusions and monitor the progress of children and young people missing and at risk of missing education.

The council has made good progress in raising standards at Key Stage 2, which are now in line with the national average for mathematics and science, and above in English. This is primarily because of targeted support to schools in need, the successful engagement of primary head teachers with the specialist science college and consultant support for mathematics and science. Successful intervention and good use of inspection outcomes have led to a reduction of schools in a category of concern, with one secondary and no primary schools now identified. Inspection judgements overall have identified fewer Bexley schools as good or outstanding compared to similar authorities although the picture is improving.

Work with schools to improve attendance and behaviour is being given a high priority and a new model for provision and support for children and young people with emotional and behaviour difficulties has been developed with head teachers. Attendance in primary and secondary schools remains broadly in line with national levels. Authorised absence has reduced from above national levels in 2005 and is now in line. The percentage of looked after children and young people who missed at least 25 days of schooling has increased and is above national levels but below the levels of similar authorities. Exclusions in primary schools have reduced but have risen in secondary and special schools, where permanent exclusions are higher than those found in similar authorities. Secondary schools have agreed a hard-to-place and managed-move protocol. There has been an increase in the provision of alternative tuition for permanently excluded pupils. The local authority is taking appropriate action to improve attendance and behaviour. This includes a newly established Behaviour and Attendance Strategy Group, chaired by the Director of Children's Services. A consultant has been appointed to update existing exclusion procedures and oversee their implementation through meetings with schools to discuss exclusion issues.

Protocols are in place to track and monitor children and young people moving out of education in Bexley and at risk of missing education or not on a school roll. All identified children and young people are allocated a key worker with monthly monitoring taking place.

The joint area review identified that early years and child care provision was satisfactory and this remains the case. Work with schools is being undertaken to raise the local authority's performance on the Foundation Stage profile which fell in 2006 to below national levels. The local authority Foundation Stage team has been reconfigured and additional support and training provided to schools has been linked to an analysis of Foundation Stage outcomes. Monitoring the schools' actions to

improve the Foundation Stage is emphasised as a component of the School Improvement Partners' work with the school. Early indications are that the local authority interventions are having a positive impact on the quality of provision and pupil outcomes.

Standards of attainment at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 are in line with the national average. Standards in Key Stage 4 are good and above national levels. Pupils make the expected progress based on their prior attainment in Key Stages 2 and 3 and good progress in Key Stage 4. The trend of improvement is above the national trend in Key Stages 2 and 4 and in reading and mathematics at Key Stage 1. The trend of improvement at Key Stage 3 however is below the national trend in mathematics and science. Although the percentage of looked after children and young people who took at least one GCSE has increased to above the national level, the percentage of care leavers at Key Stage 4 who gained at least one GCSE has declined and is well below national levels. Steps have been taken to improve the educational outcomes of care leavers, through increased direct support from the local Connexions team, for example, although the impact of these actions is not yet evident.

The joint area review judged provision for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to be satisfactory although the number of statements was higher than national comparators. There has been a reduction in new statements to well below national levels and the overall percentage of statements has fallen, although it remains above the national level. Consultation is underway to create more specialist provision in mainstream schools.

There has been a reduction in the number of schools below floor targets at Key Stage 2 and there are none at Key Stage 4. However, a third of primary schools are in the bottom quartile for value added.

The majority of children and young people who responded to the Tellus2 survey commented that they enjoy school and most said that they try their best.

Areas for development

- Continue with the joint area review recommendation to work with schools to improve attendance and behaviour and reduce exclusions.
- Improve the progress pupils make from Foundation Stage to Key Stage 3 to raise standards.

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. Two recommendations emerged from the joint area review.

For action in the next six months

- Continue to improve the level and quality of active involvement of children and young people in decision making and ensure that all services, partners and service users understand, implement and evaluate the new Consultation and Participation Strategy.

For action in the longer term

- Develop school councils and encourage more young people to vote in relevant elections.

The council has made strong progress in improving the level and quality of involvement of children and young people in decision making with evidence of their participation in service development. The council has published a multi-agency participation toolkit and training has been provided in its use. Participation champions have been appointed across all agencies. 'Hear by Right' standards were used to plan and evaluate the recent consultation regarding the integrated youth strategy. Thirty-four schools and childcare settings have successfully secured additional funding to develop participation projects, which are currently being evaluated by children and young people. Care leavers and looked after children and young people have participated in the Corporate Parenting Forum, achieving improvements on a number of issues, for example participating in the training of social workers.

The participation of looked after children and young people in their statutory review remains strong and is above the national average. All children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities attend their social care reviews and a communication project has been established to ensure that young people with communication difficulties better engage in meetings and reviews. Targeted action to improve the attendance of children and young people at child protection conferences, and to ensure that conferences are conducted in a more child friendly way is underway.

Good progress has been made in the development of school councils with formal links now established between secondary schools and the Youth Council, a similar approach is being developed with primary schools. School councils influence appointments and strategic planning. Two participation officers have been appointed and are developing inter-school communication via the web and training opportunities for all school councils. Members of the Youth Council Children's Parliament and UK Youth Parliament meet with elected members to contribute their views. School councils are increasingly responding to opportunities provided to engage in Article 12 events and the annual children and youth summits. Young people are represented on the Children's Trust, participating in decisions across health, education and social care. Young people have also been involved in developing the Play Strategy and deciding on the spending of lottery funding. Inspection findings have judged making a positive contribution as good or better in more Bexley schools than schools nationally.

Children and young people have access to a wide range of services that successfully support their social and emotional development. The social and emotional aspect of learning programme (SEAL) is being extended into secondary schools.

Partnership working between agencies to prevent anti-social behaviour is good. Effective diversionary action is taken to reduce anti social behaviour such as the Ball Court Football league and there is good partnership working between schools and the police to improve information sharing. The rates of first time offenders to the Youth Justice system are above national levels. An analysis of first time offenders is being used to inform future prevention planning. Effective targeting by the Youth Offending Team has reduced the numbers who re-offend to below national levels. Offending by looked after children and young people has continued to fall and is below the national average. The youth service inspection published in 2007 found a good contribution overall with some variations in quality which are being addressed through the improvement plan.

Areas for development

- Reduce the number of first time entrants to the youth justice system.
- Extend the programme for school links with the Youth Council to include primary schools.

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. Three recommendations emerged from the joint area review.

For action in the longer term

- Improve the educational opportunities for those with severe and complex learning difficulties and/or disabilities.
- With its partners, increase the range of post-16 learning opportunities at Entry Level and Level 1.
- With its partners, reduce the number of 17 year olds who drop out of full-time education.

The council has a strong commitment to developing additional places for children and young people with severe and complex disabilities in mainstream education through its 'Achievement for All Strategy' which is being implemented effectively. The multi-agency transitions panel manages and monitors the progress of every child with a statement or with additional needs. It has improved the numbers of young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities leaving school in education, employment and training from 75% to 91%. Unrestricted Connexions funding is

allocated for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, particularly to access education, employment and training opportunities. Although the percentage of those not in education, employment or training with learning difficulties and/or disabilities has reduced it is above national levels.

Work with partners and between schools to increase the range of post-16 learning opportunities at entry level and Level 1 is progressing well. Post-16 participation is above national levels and there has been an increase in the participation rates of 17 year olds in full time education, which is now in line with national levels. The local authority has a comprehensive understanding of the relevant key issues. It recognises in its Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP) review that retention post-17 needs to be improved. Well developed plans are in place to increase further education provision across neighbouring boroughs and the secondary consortia within the borough are planning for additional Level 1 provision. Young people are involved in the design of new curriculum and surveys indicate high levels of satisfaction with the current provision.

The proportion of children and young people not in education, employment or training has fallen and is below national levels with the percentage of 19-year-olds taking up education, employment and training above national levels. The tracking of individuals is effective and significant improvements have been made to reduce the number of young people whose destination is unknown. The percentage of looked after children and young people in education, employment or training is very good compared to that of all young people nationally and the proportion in suitable accommodation at the age of 19 is similar to national.

Young people are supported well to prepare for working life. Child care provision has increased by a greater percentage than nationally and families are provided with good information and support from a range of agencies. Investment in a wide range of family support services has increased and free public transport is available to children and young people at school or college. The Teenage Parent Support Service has been expanded, offering support for 18 teenage parents in independent housing. The take up of the education maintenance allowance is good.

Strong and well established collaboration takes place for post-16 learners and a 14—19 strategy group is overseeing this work effectively. Partnership working is becoming increasingly coherent with provision being planned collaboratively, although the effectiveness of joint working varies across the borough. A successful strategy development conference focused on improving the quality of services to learners. The participation by Black and minority ethnic groups is analysed thoroughly and detailed in the 14—19 service plan. Bexley contributes fully to the London e-prospectus. None of the diploma bids submitted were successful, with insufficient employer engagement an area for improvement. Educational outcomes at the end of Key Stage 4 are good and above national levels. There are good opportunities for vocational studies at Key Stage 4 and suitable work experience placements available. Effective youth work makes a positive contribution to good achievements by young people.

Areas for development

- The joint area review recommendations remain relevant as they were identified for the longer term.

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

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The council's capacity to improve its services for children and young people is good, and its management of these services is good. One recommendation emerged from the joint area review.

For action in the next six months

- Ensure that all action plans have objectives that are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-limited to achieve more robust monitoring of outcomes and impact.

The CYPP 2007—2008 action plan includes all the recommendations from the joint area review with stronger systems in place for monitoring progress by the Children and Young People's Trust Board, Executive Board and to the council. All plans are reviewed on a quarterly basis with progress identified. More objectives are specific, measurable, achievable and time limited. However, some inconsistencies remain with some plans lacking clear measurable targets and outcomes. The joint area review judged performance management to be adequate with systems across new partnerships at the early stages of development. The council identifies that a stronger culture of performance monitoring is developing and interagency data sharing has improved. There is a newly appointed Deputy Director for Performance Planning and Resources who will lead the further development of outcome based accountability.

The council's ambition remains good. The visible leadership, shared values and sound management approach to change identified in the joint area review continue to drive improvement. A service configuration plan is being implemented to integrate services providing early intervention through local school community clusters, although, it is too early to link the impact of this reconfiguration with outcomes for children and young people. Action is being taken when strategies are not making a difference, for example in relation to reducing exclusions. A reviewed Workforce Strategy Group has taken on the responsibility for the evaluation of the Work Force Development Plan. Qualifications achieved by social care staff are significantly below national levels. The leadership of school improvement is good with well focused strategies to tackle underperformance. However strategic leadership and management of the youth service was judged as adequate in the most recent youth service report and action has been taken to improve this with a widely consulted and approved Integrated Youth Strategy for the Borough. The views of children, young

people and families are sought and used to identify priorities which are clear and appropriate.

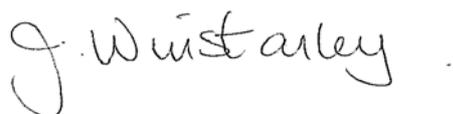
Overall the council has demonstrated good progress in meeting the joint area review recommendations, and shows good capacity to maintain and improve further its services for children and young people. The good track record of improvement identified in the joint area review has been sustained and is having an impact on outcomes for children and young people, for example, in raising standards in Key Stages 2 and 4, reducing the number of schools in a category of concern and in falling numbers of looked after children and young people and children on the Child Protection Register. There is established partnership working and efficient, effective use of resources. The significant financial pressures of the Primary Care Trust are creating pressures in some areas but these are being well managed in partnership with the council.

Areas for development

- Ensure consistency of action plans to achieve more robust monitoring of outcomes and impact.
- Improve relevant qualifications for social care staff

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